THE MELOON FARM

MARIA LOUISE POOL

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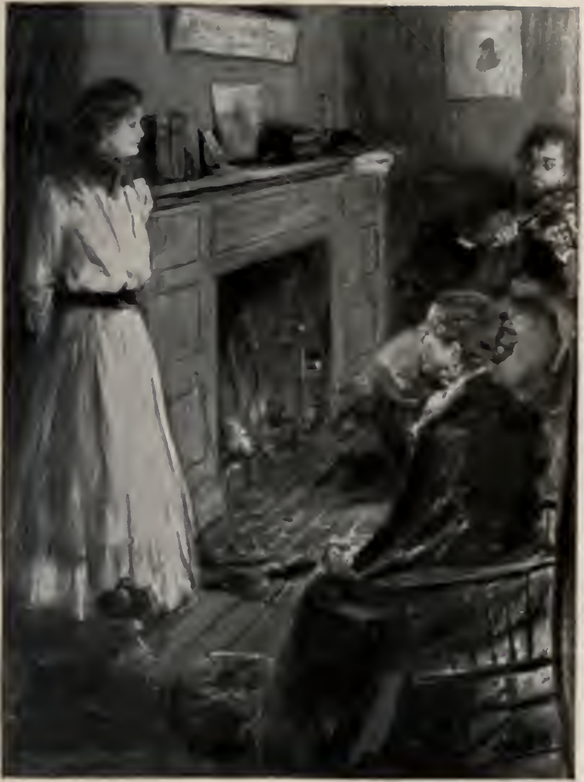

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"MELOON LOOKED UP AT THE GIRL BY THE MANTEL"

THE MELOON FARM

A Novel

BY

MARIA LOUISE POOL

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THE MELOON FARM

THE MELOON FARM

I

A LOST DOG

HE was going at a steady sling-trot across the wet pasture. The dew was so heavy this early fall morning that every wild-rose bush and sweetfern shrub glittered in the sun. The dog was drenched, save for the top of his head and a narrow space down his spine. He was smooth-haired and brindled, and he wore a wide, brass-studded collar with a plate which bore this inscription: "Lotos. No. 310. Wilhelmina Armstrong." Sometimes a bird flew at his approach; or a chipmonk darted up a tree, wheeled, and looked down at the passing of this dangerous monster. But Lotos did not mind any of these. He went with his head down, and with determination, until he reached the very top of the pasture; then he stopped and looked off over the country spread out before him. Perhaps he saw the farm-houses and barns, here and there, and the distant stand-pipe of the town water of Manville. This stand-pipe was painted vermilion, and was a prominent object in the landscape. Perhaps he saw none of these things; one cannot be sure, always, of what a dog does see. He stood with his head elevated now, his black nostrils working anxiously, his tail drooped. After a moment his tail drooped still more, his nose went up higher, and he howled. Then he began to trot about in a small space, snuffing at the grass and bushes. He looked so draggled and forlorn, and seemed so worried that you would have been sorry for him. He was not thin in flesh, however, and probably was not suffering from hunger. There was a wet fragment of blue ribbon dangling from his collar, this fragment hinting at feminine hands.

After a while Lotos flung himself on his side on the ground and gave himself up for a moment to panting heavily. The sun was shining brilliantly, and it was getting very warm. But tired though he was, he could only lie a moment. He sprang up and began running about again. Evidently he was lost, or had lost his friend. It was pitiable to see him.

Suddenly he stopped short, head erect, tail stiffened, ears cocked. He heard the sound of footsteps. The wind was blowing from him and he could learn nothing from the smell. He waited. It seemed a long time before the footsteps came nearer, but they did come at last. A man emerged from a thicket of pine-trees just below the brow of the eminence on top of which the dog now stood. Lotos waited, the eager hope growing in his attitude, and then gradually dying out of it.

It was a young man, or perhaps I should say a youngish man, of a little over thirty, who came slowly along, a thick stick in his hand, his manner suggesting that he was travelling without any strictly definite object. As he drew nearer Lotos growled provisionally, wagged his tail slightly and interrogatively, then waited.

The man did not at first see the dog, who was in a mass of sweet-fern. He paused and looked off, as the dog had done, and he, being human, probably saw the farm-houses and the distant stand-pipe. He did not recognize anything.

"Why," he exclaimed, "this isn't the place at all! How stupid I must have been to come here. Now, the question is, where am I?"

Here Lotos advanced in a semi-belligerent and wholly questioning manner.

"Hullo! Who's this?" cried the man.

And as he spoke his face changed greatly; it flushed and then grew pale. Lotos was sniffing at these unfamiliar trousers, and he was evidently glad of a companion in his lost state. More than that, was there gradually coming a puzzled recognition to his mind? His tail wagged faster.

The stranger suddenly sank down on one knee in the grass, seized the dog's collar, and read what was written upon it.

"Old fellow—dear old fellow—don't you know me?" he said. "Lotos, I say, Lotos, give us a paw, old boy! Give us a paw, and say you're glad to see me!"

The dog's whole body was now wriggling furiously. He sprang upon the man, a paw upon each shoulder, while he licked his face and whined in a tremolo of emotion.

When the effusion of this greeting had somewhat subsided and the man was wiping his face with his handkerchief, he said: "Now, dog, give an account of yourself. Are you lost also? But you ought to know this country, every inch of it. Take me out somewhere."

Lotos listened with one ear forward and one back.

Now that he could think again, his depression plainly returned to him, somewhat modified. He was saying one of two things: either "I'm lost," or "I can't find her, and she is lost."

But his companion could not understand him. He stooped and read the words on the collar once more.

"Wilhelmina Armstrong—Wilhelmina Armstrong. Where is she, boy, where is she?"

The dog jumped up again, but not so exuberantly. It was as if he had responded, "Yes, where is she? I'd give the world to find her."

After this the stranger and the dog strolled about in a desultory manner on the hill for a time; then the man walked with a resolute step down towards the nearest house, Lotos following him, but following with an air that seemed to say: "This is only because I haven't found her; if I find her I sha'n't stay with you—not a moment."

The nearest house proved to be more than a mile away, and a black bog had to be crossed or skirted; these two preferred to cross it. They came out with much inky mud on their legs; but what of that?

The man rapped with the top of his stick at the door of the house, while Lotos waited in the rear. Footsteps came, the door was opened the space permitted by a chain, and a woman peeped out. The man took off his hat.

"I think I've lost my way," he said. "Did a family of Armstrongs ever live in this neighborhood?"

She unchained the door. This wasn't a tramp; at least, not the kind she feared.

"Armstrongs?" she repeated. She turned her head and called back through the entry, "Mother, did any Armstrongs ever live round here?"

A fat woman in a calico wrapper, with the sleeves pinned up at the shoulders, came forward, a foam of soap-suds dropping from her hands as she stepped. She looked at the man with a prolonged curiosity before she replied:

"Seems to me—why, let me see—there was a family of that name over on the other side of the mountain, but that's more'n ten miles away. You must have taken the wrong turn at the corners—lots of folks take the wrong turn at the corners."

"I came through the woods and the fields."

"You did? Wall, I don't wonder you got out the way. You must have had a dretful tramp. Was it John Armstrong you wanted?"

"It was Lemuel Armstrong's family."

"Lemuel?—Lemuel's dead. I'm sure I heard he died some years ago. I don't know much 'bout 'em. There was a daughter, wa'n't there?"

"Yes."

"Didn't I hear something 'bout an Armstrong girl's tryin' to be a singer, Matty?" to her daughter; but Matty wasn't sure, she didn't quite know, still it did seem as if she had heard some such thing; she guessed that "it hadn't amounted to anything, or there'd been more talk."

The stranger inquired the way to the other side of the mountain.

The elder woman, with the soap and water now somewhat dried on her hands, left the house that she might more conveniently give her directions. She flung her apron up over her shoulders, saying as she did so that "she'd be'n over the wash-tub, and was always afraid of taking cold when she was so sweaty."

Instead of directing, she inquired:

"D'you know Lem Armstrong's family?"

"A little."

"Was it true, then, that his wife was kinder religious crazy?"

"I didn't know it."

"P'r'aps 'twas since you knew them, then, and p'r'aps there wa'n't nothin' in it, anyway. You can't tell much by what you hear, can you?"

The man murmured a negative. He was evidently trying to conceal his impatience. Lotos was examining the woman's skirts.

"Does your dog bite?" she asked.

"Occasionally; he sometimes gnaws women a little, but nothing to amount to much."

The speaker's gravity was perfect.

The woman shrank away.

"My gracious! I don't want him to gnaw me," she exclaimed. She hurried into the house and shut the door. It was immediately struck impatiently with a stick and was opened a small space.

"You haven't directed me, madam," said the man. "Lotos, come here!" as the dog put a foot on the step-stone.

"Go down the road 'n' turn to your left; keep on awhile till you come to two roads — the left one 'll—"

"Mar," from the daughter, who had again come into the entry, "you shouldn't tell him that way; it 'll only confuse him. The left—"

This was the beginning of an altercation between the two women, and when, at the end of a few minutes, the mother, who had conquered, turned again to the crack in the door, she found herself addressing space.

"Law!" she cried, "where is he?" She flung the door wide. There was the man, with the dog behind him, hurrying along the highway.

"I guess he couldn't wait for us to have our quarrel out," was the shrewd response.

The next house was nearly half a mile away. The stranger walked now as if possessed by a keen impatience. He found a man digging potatoes in a garden-patch. This man asked only a few preliminary questions before he gave the desired information. He ended by saying, "It wa'n't much use to try to find Lem Armstrong's fam'ly, for he'd heard they'd gone to foreign parts after Lem had died."

It was a long distance, and this man, whose name was Hildreth, had already walked many miles since sunrise. He went on not only unflinchingly, but eagerly. He shared some biscuits from his pocket with the dog, or he tried to share them, but Lotos refused, with a manner that plainly said: "Do you think I can eat when I have lost Wilhelmina Armstrong? You may, being a mere man; but I cannot."

So Hildreth munched his food alone.

At last, and it was late in the afternoon, Hildreth came out in an upland pasture, where he heard the sound of a rapidly running river and the more distant noise of falls.

Lotos snuffed about excitedly, and then would have made a dart forward had not his companion suddenly clutched him by the collar and held him.

"No, sir, you don't leave me now," he cried. "You shall serve to introduce me—she is looking for you—she thinks she has lost you—I will restore you—she will be obliged to thank me. Lotos, do you know you're a lucky dog?"

Lotos struggled, but Hildreth held him fast. He drew out his handkerchief, knotted an end of it about the dog's collar, and thus held him. When Lotos perceived the direction in which he was led, he ceased to rebel, and trotted cheerfully.

Once Hildreth stopped and looked off towards the river, and to a little open space on its banks.

"There's where the carriage stood, and up here, along this path, I saw her coming—the first time I saw her. Gad! what a sentimental idiot I'm growing! Perhaps I shall begin to snivel presently. She has probably forgotten that she ever knew me."

Though he spoke thus, Hildreth did not quite believe this last assertion. What man would quite believe that a woman had forgotten him?

After a few moments man and dog hurried on, and at last came into a barn-yard, and thence into the wider yard of a farm-house. The grass was tall and twisted about Hildreth's feet; the dog wriggled. A horse and wagon were entering the yard from the road. On the wagon-seat sat a young woman. An older woman hurried from an open door of the house.

"Oh, mother, have you heard from him?"

II

A FREE MAN

THE question was put eagerly, and the girl jumped to the ground and caught hold of her mother's arm.

"No, I haven't," was the reply, "and we sha'n't hear. He's probably killed. I do wish, Wilhelminy, that you wouldn't set your heart on anything—if we set our heart on anything it's almost sure to be taken away from us."

"Don't, mother! That's too horrible. But I'm going to find Lotos. He isn't killed. Oh!"

She uttered this exclamation as the dog dashed forward, threw himself upon her, and straightway began what seemed a process of devouring. The handkerchief gyrated with his movements; the man who had held the handkerchief purposely remained hidden at the end of the cow-shed. He leaned against the wall, his head bent, his lips compressed, hearing what passed a few yards away from him.

"Oh, Lotos! Lotos! where have you been? You don't know how I've suffered. Oh, you dear old fellow! There! There! Don't eat me entirely. Yes, I'm glad, too. Yes! yes! But what's this? Where did you get this handkerchief?"

Silence, during which Miss Armstrong detached the handkerchief and examined it, not with any great appearance of interest, however, and the man near shut his lips more closely yet, and grasped his stick with a tighter grip. He was wondering if his name was on that scrap of linen. He was wondering also if he had done well in coming. Well or ill, he had fancied that he must come, as we all have times of fancying that we must do a certain thing. Later we may scoff at ourselves for our impulses. Are you the same man that you were ten years ago? But you would not now feel the slightest temptation to do to-day what seemed absolutely life-saving or happiness-giving then.

The girl pulled out the corners of the handkerchief.

"Oh, here's a name," she said.

And then there was another silence. Lotos had seated himself close to the feet of his mistress.

The elder woman gazed without speaking for a moment; then she asked:

"Can you read the name, Miny?"

No answer.

"Can you read the name, Miny?"

"Yes."

The girl looked up in a dazed way, as if what she had read could not be real.

"Well, what is it?"

"It's Vane Hildreth."

"What?"

"Vane Hildreth."

Mrs. Armstrong did not speak directly; then she advanced, took the handkerchief, and said, coldly:

"I guess you must be mistaken."

There was no reply to this remark, and the elder woman read the name for herself.

"I shouldn't suppose that man would come round here again," she said at last.

She did not look like a person who would often speak severely, but there was a great bitterness in her manner now.

The girl made no reply. She stood still, with Lotos at her feet. The horse took a few steps towards the barn and then stopped to eat some grass. One would have said that this yard, with the hot September sun lying upon it, was one of the most peaceful places on the earth.

The sound of a step made Mrs. Armstrong turn, but the girl remained quiet with that extreme stillness that does not denote relaxation. She did not even move an eyelash as Hildreth walked into sight. He paused a few paces away and removed his hat, holding it stiffly in his hand. He looked first at Mrs. Armstrong, then at her daughter, and there his glance lingered.

It must have been a very embarrassing position for him, as neither woman gave him any greeting. His face became paler and paler, but at the same time took on a set expression that gave a sternness to his aspect. Lotos alone looked at him pleasantly, and he gave an inquiring glance at his mistress as if to ask what was the trouble now.

Of course it was a woman who broke the silence. It was Mrs. Armstrong who spoke.

"Mr. Hildreth," she said, "I am surprised to see you here."

She had a gentle, sensitive face, almost deprecating; a look as if she would weep over the suffering of any creature; but now she had the appearance of a belligerent bird ready to ruffle, and peck, and die if necessary.

The man turned to her as he replied:

"Are you? You should not be. You should have expected me sometime. You might have known I should come sometime."

His voice was very low, and it was somewhat monotonous, perhaps from his effort to make it steady.

The girl made no sign, but there was in her attitude still more the appearance of aloofness, as if she were unwillingly present at something that did not in the least concern her.

"No," said Mrs. Armstrong, "I believed you would stay away; I believed you would be glad to stay away."

"Glad to stay away from her?"

There was now a slight ring to his tone. He was still holding his hat in his hand; he was leaning on his stick.

He withdrew his eyes and gazed about him blankly. Since this girl was so remote, why should he seem aware of her presence? He was frozen; and yet there was a fire in his heart.

Mrs. Armstrong ruffled her feathers still more. She took a step forward.

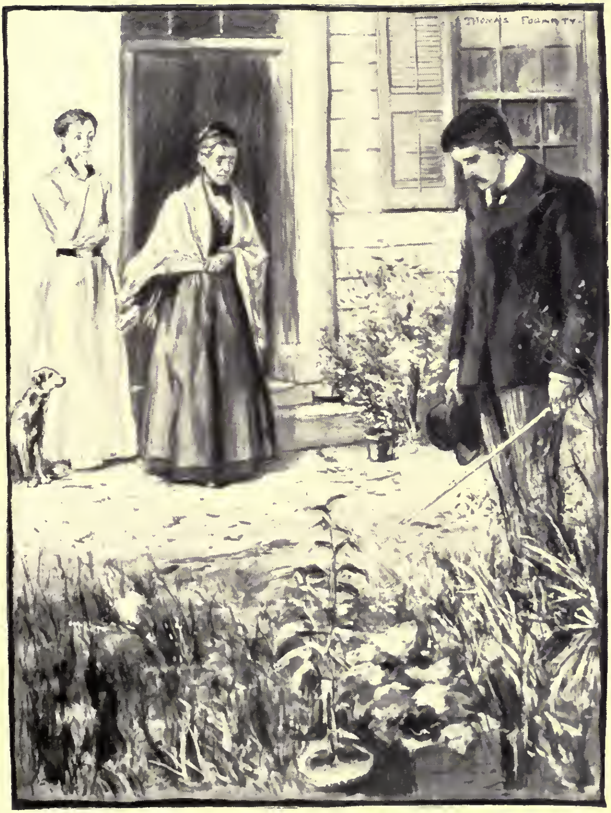
"We're not used tc being insulted," she said.

"Mother!" from the girl, but she did not turn her eyes.

Hildreth moved his stick back and forth, scraping it along the grass.

Lotos rose from his place by his mistress, walked to the man, gave two or three quick licks of his tongue across the fingers that held the stick, hesitated an instant, then walked back and resumed his old position.

Hildreth fought against an hysterical sense of choking. For the moment he was sorry that the dog had been kind to him. He was quite sure that he would need all his self-control; evidently his old


THOMAS FOGARTY

“‘WE ARE NOT USED TO BEING INSULTED,’ SHE SAID”

dog was the only being here who was going to be kind.

It was of no use to ask himself if he deserved that these two women should seem otherwise, for our deserts seem to have nothing to do with our grief or our resentments.

As for Hildreth, while he was crossing the ocean that he might seek this interview, he had given very little thought to his own deeds in the past. He was obeying what he called an "irresistible impulse," and circumstances had now made it innocent in him to obey this impulse.

He had considered himself a very good fellow indeed that he had made a fight against his wishes while they were not innocent. If he had been a knave once he was not going to be one a second time.

He was not thinking these things, however, just now. He was only holding himself as firmly as he could, and hoping that he could at least seem manly, however weak he felt.

"Isn't it an insult, Wilhelminy, for Mr. Hildreth to come here? Have you forgotten how near he came to ruining you? I didn't ever expect he'd appear in these parts again; and now he has come I think he'd better go away."

The speaker's face was red, her eyes distended. And yet as she looked at the man she felt a sudden pity; but she distrusted this pity. She supposed he was suffering; she wished that she could help him, but—why didn't her daughter speak? Why did she leave everything for her to do?

"Mrs. Armstrong," began Hildreth, "I wish you'd listen to me before you condemn me. I thought I had a right to come. My wife is dead. She died six months ago. I waited six months. Though I haven't seen her since I saw Miss Armstrong, I felt somehow that it would be more decent not to rush off here immediately, as I wanted to do. I didn't expect to outlive her. Since that fever she has been in splendid health. She was killed in a railroad accident. I tell you it's horrible to know that some one stands between you and all chance of happiness. You see, I couldn't even try for happiness while she lived. And it's horrible to be glad a person's dead. But I'm glad. Yes, I stand here a free man."

Hildreth had talked rapidly, in a thick voice. He had not looked at any one, but had gazed off towards the hills behind the house.

When he ceased speaking no one responded, and he presently began again, still thickly. He appeared to be resolved to say what he had come to say, let the result be what it would. This time he addressed the younger woman.

"When I happened to find Lotos I thought 'twas a good sign. He was lost, and I would bring him back to you; you'd be grateful to me, because you love him. I knew you'd love him, and that he would make you think of me. He's a good fellow; he loves me a little still, but, of course, he cares more for you. For a minute, when the dog recognized me, I was happy. I don't mean that I've been wretched every minute of these six years. I've had my triumphs; perhaps you've heard my name. But I've been a fool all the time. There's not been once that I've come out to sing to an audience that I haven't looked for you among that crowd of faces. That was absurd. I knew there was no likelihood of your being present, but I searched for you all the same, and I sung for you. I've studied fiercely; and I've always sung for you — I suppose that's why I've moved people so. But I don't care so much about all that as I thought I should care. One tires of it; one tires of most things. But I had the thought of you—that thought of you—"

The man's voice was more hoarse. He ceased speaking abruptly, and took a step towards the girl.

"You had no right to think of her," said the mother. "And now will you go away?"

Hildreth did not answer directly. He had been speaking to Wilhelmina, and he continued gazing at her. She had maintained the attitude she had assumed at first.

After a moment Hildreth turned. He put on his hat and walked quickly out towards the road; there he paused and placed a hand on the fence as he looked back. The sight of his ghastly face suddenly melted Mrs. Armstrong's mood. She had steeled herself as long as she could, and the reaction had come. She hastened to Hildreth; she touched his arm.

"I'm sorry to have hurt you," she began, "but—"

"Oh, pray don't apologize. Good-afternoon, ladies. Sorry to have intruded — very sorry to have intruded."

And Hildreth flung up his head and went on out of sight.

Lotos ran after him for several yards, paused, gazed wistfully, then trotted slowly back to the two women and sat down again in his old place.

Mrs. Armstrong made a few uncertain steps, wringing her hands as she did so. She began to weep.

"I hope I wasn't too hard on him," she said. "Miny, I do hope I wasn't too hard on him. Why don't you say something? I do believe you haven't spoken since he came."

III

COUSIN RAWDON'S LETTER

AS the girl made no response, her mother went to her and grasped her arm.

"Wilhelminy," she repeated, "I do believe you haven't spoken since he came."

"I had nothing to say. What should I have to say?"

"Oh, I'm sure I don't know—I'm sure I don't know. Mebby I've done wrong," quaveringly.

The girl moved away a step.

"If you wanted to hurt him you've succeeded," she said, hardly. "You never did have any charity for Vane Hildreth—and you have charity for everybody else."

Wilhelmina's eyes blazed at her companion. Then she lowered them and stepped still farther away.

"Don't, Miny, don't! I've a good mind to run after him," with a swift step in the direction Hildreth had gone.

"No, you shall not!"

"But what shall I do? I did hurt him."

"There's nothing to be done. Let's stop talking about him."

"But— Oh, dear! I always *was* afraid you'd get to loving him sometime, even after his deceiving you and having you go through the form of marriage with him, and he a married man. I hope you don't forget what he did."

"Mother"—the girl turned full upon her companion—"I tell you we won't talk about this. Do you think it's pleasant for me? I don't love Vane Hildreth the least in the world. I remember what he did. Do you think I'm likely to forget? Come, Lotos, let's go down by the falls."

Lotos rose, wagging and expectant.

"We must unharness the horse, though; we forgot him."

Wilhelmina took hold of the bridle and led the horse, who had wandered to the other side of the yard, into the barn. Once within the barn, she suddenly let go the bridle and dropped on her knees by the dog; she put her arms about his neck and pressed her cheek on the top of his head.

"It was horrible—horrible—when I thought you were lost," she whispered.

Having indulged herself in this embrace, she proceeded to take the harness from the horse.

When she and Lotos started for the river and the falls she heard her mother's voice calling her.

"Wa'n't there any letters, Miny?"

Yes, there was one letter, which she had entirely forgotten. She thrust her hand into her pocket and drew forth the envelope, hurrying back to the house, where her mother stood in the open doorway.

Mrs. Armstrong came forward, but she did not seem to notice the letter. There were marks of tears on her face.

"Oh, Miny," she cried, "I've been prayin' for forgiveness if I was hard. I don't never want to be hard to any mortal creature. What am I that I should judge? What am I that I should pass sentence?"

"We won't think of it any more," responded the girl.

"But I want to be forgiven. I wish you'd come in and pray with me, Miny, just a minute—do!"

After an instant's hesitation the daughter entered the house, and, guided by her mother, walked to the old lounge, and the two knelt down there. The younger woman covered her face with her hands and waited. She felt tired and hard-hearted. It didn't seem to her at that moment that she cared for anything. She vaguely heard the passionate, ungrammatical petition which was uttered. When it was through, Mrs. Armstrong rose to her feet and looked down at her companion, who still remained in the position she had taken, her face covered.

"I s'pose you're praying for me, ain't you?" she asked.

"No—no— Really, I haven't been praying at all."

Miny rose now. She smiled at her mother's look of regret.

"You know I'm not given to prayer, as you are. I don't understand it."

"God has heard me," said Mrs. Armstrong, solemnly; "He has heard and answered me; and when He comes on a pillar of fire in the heavens He will not condemn me."

Miny shrank a little as she heard these words and saw the speaker's face.

"Come," she said, briskly, "you've forgotten the letter." She leaned forward and kissed the rapt face near her.

"Yes, so I had. Is it to me? I didn't know but 'twas from some of your singing friends."

"My singing friends are not thinking of me. It's to you."

"Why, it's from The Junction! I don't never have letters. Who do you s'pose it's from?"

She turned the envelope back and forth, as people do who have no correspondence, as if they must discover the writer from the outside of the wrapper.

"Who can it be from?" Wilhelmina was leaning against the casing of the kitchen door; there was something listless in her attitude.

"What if you should open it?" she suggested.

At this Mrs. Armstrong began a search for the scissors, found them at last, and carefully cut the end of the envelope. A half sheet of foolscap was drawn out; it was partly written over on one side in firm characters, with ink that evidently did not wish to leave the pen, as nearly every word seemed to have been traced twice over.

By this time the girl herself began to be interested, but she waited in silence.

"It's dreadful blind," said her mother. She turned the sheet. "Why, I do declare if 'tain't from Cousin Rawdon! I 'ain't heard from him since I was married. He didn't think much of Lemuel, 'n' Lemuel didn't think much of him. There wa'n't any love lost between 'em. What can he want? What a kind of a lawyerfied hand he does write! I can't make out head nor tail. You read it to me, Miny."

The girl took the sheet of paper; her keen young eyes leaped down the page, then came back to the top, and she began:

"COUSIN SERISSA,—I don't suppose you'll guess why I'm taking my pen to write to you. I don't send many letters in these days, and the world seems to go on wonderfully well if I don't. I shouldn't do it now if I hadn't just heard that your husband is dead. It's late for me to know this; it was natural that you should forget to notify me. We have passed long ago out of each other's lives. That's the way of this world. And I've just heard you were left poor, and with a daughter. I've no idea where you are now, but I think this will reach you sometime. I ask you to come here and live, and keep my house—you and the girl. My wife died long ago—you knew I married? I've been getting on in a barbarous fashion for years. I've concluded that I don't 'relish my victuals' this way. If you should suit, and I should suit you, I'll do well by you. I tell you that in the beginning. I'm rather 'forehanded,' you know, but I mean to take the good of what I've got, even if those that come after me should object.

"I suppose you must have faded—women always fade; but how pretty you were! As for me—but wait. Let me hear as soon as you get this, for I've made a resolve to live like a civilized being again.

"Bring the child, of course. If this sounds abrupt, you mustn't be offended. We're older now, and know better than to be irritated by trifles.

"I mean to wait six months for your answer, for you may be in Australia, for all I know.

"Really I hope you're not as pretty as you were, because if you are, you'll be all the more shocked at the grizzled old animal I have become.

"RAWDON MELOON."

"Well, I never! I never did! If it don't beat the Dutch that Rawdon should have come to life again like that!"

Mrs. Armstrong took the paper from her daughter's hands and gazed at it. "I s'pose he's changed as much as I have. I know he used to think I was pretty. I may as well tell you, Miny, that Cousin Rawdon thought he was in love with me, but I must say I never did think I was in love with him, though he certainly was the han'somest man I ever saw, and such a style! You needn't laugh, Miny. Don't you think there's never any style unless it's an opera feller or a city feller? There is."

Mrs. Armstrong sat down, and her mind ran back through the years, gathering up items it had dropped forever, she had thought.

"We've spent every bit of money," she said at last, rousing herself. "I s'pose you wouldn't go there for anything, Miny, but to me it seems providential. I think we are led. Don't you think we're led, Miny?"

The mother gazed anxiously at the face near her; she saw that the eyes had an introverted look; and she saw also what struck to her heart anew, that there was something tired and listless in Wilhelmina's whole aspect. Why should she be tired and listless, and she so young? This was something that Mrs. Armstrong had made the subject of many prayers; she found a sustaining comfort in those prayers, though she had not yet perceived that she had received an answer; she was looking daily, almost hourly, for that answer. It might come at any time; it might come before that glorious day, now fast approaching, when the Lord of heaven and earth would appear, coming to judge the quick and the dead. For years she had been looking to see her Lord, and as she grew older that hope and expectation, instead of growing fainter, became more and more vivid; it seemed to her that it was underneath every thought and every fear. Would such a thing happen before the coming of the Lord?

She gazed now with a sort of timid earnestness at the girl standing near her. She had seasons of wondering if this girl were really her child, the child who had been tender and caressing and protective. She was protecting and kind now, but her mind was away—where?

Six years of foreign life had rolled over Serissa Armstrong and left her precisely as she had been when she left New England. She had lived for Miny, lived and ordered her life so that Miny might study and practise, study and practise. And the whole life in those very modest lodgings in Paris had been like one long dream to the Yankee woman —unreal, not life at all, merely waiting and serving and looking for the Lord.

When she used to go out marketing in Paris with her covered basket on her arm she saw in a kind of daze the strange scene. She had been able to learn only a few words of the outlandish talk going on about her. Nothing was real but the constant memory of the old farm-house, the bright or bleak sky above it. She cooked, and washed, and mended for her daughter and herself; she did everything with her own hands. How cheaply they lived! But their money held out — Miss Runciman's money, Miny always called it, and she meant to pay it back. Would she ever pay it back now? Mrs. Armstrong wished that money to be returned; she had never believed in Miss Runciman; it was Miss Runciman who was responsible for all this bother about learning to sing.

But now—how strange that Cousin Rawdon Meloon should have risen up out of the past in this way! It was God who was doing it. She hoped that Miny would decide wisely—a wise decision being a decision to go to the Meloon farm. That was a haven.

Rawdon Meloon was not a very near relative, being a kind of third cousin, but they had always called each other by that term, and now how very fitting and proper that she should go and be his housekeeper, and that he should give them a home.

She still kept up that anxious gaze at her daughter. She had no real expectation that Miny would consent; in fact, she was sure that she would not. But what were they going to do? Miny was resolved to earn money somehow, but how was it to be done? And they really had no right here on the old place. Apparently they had no real right anywhere.

When the silence had become unendurable Mrs. Armstrong suddenly flung her arms about her companion's neck, and repeated, in a broken voice:

"Oh, Wilhelmina, don't you think we are led? Please don't say we won't go."

The girl put her arm around her mother's waist and smiled, making her smile seem almost genuine.

"Of course we'll go," she replied. "Why shouldn't we? I only hope that Cousin Rawdon—is that what I must call him?—will be pleased with his bargain. Perhaps I can get straw to sew—but perhaps it isn't a bonnet-making country. Where is it? I never heard of the man, or if I have heard, I've forgotten. Yes, let's go—the sooner the better. I can help you make butter. That's why I've been in Paris taking lessons of Marchesi, and almost starving you to make the money hold out—I've been doing that that I might come home and make butter."

As the girl ceased speaking she laughed.

The mother drew her child more closely to her as she whispered, pleadingly:

"You mustn't laugh like that, Miny. You'll break my heart if you do."

IV

COUSIN RAWDON

THEY lost no time. Wilhelmina had taken a few things from their trunks, and she returned them to their places. She harnessed the horse and drove to Bidwell Blake's to tell him that he might take the horse back; they shouldn't need it any more; he had been very kind, and she was greatly obliged to him. Her mother had secured a chance as housekeeper, and she was going with her for the present; she might help. As she said this there was something in her face that prevented any questions from getting so far as words.

She ordered the depot carriage to call for them, and the people along the road early the next morning caught a glimpse of Wilhelmina Armstrong and her mother in the wagon, and you may be sure that they saw the trunks strapped on behind, and the brindled dog galloping at the side.

"I guess that Armstrong girl 'ain't turned out to be a singer after all," they said, "and they must have spent a power of money on her, first 'n' last."

"The Junction" wasn't a junction of railroads, but of country highways, and it was reached after a half day's travel by rail from Boston, and then a two hours' ride in a stage-coach to the hamlet where, amid hills, and near a quick-flowing trout brook, where two roads made four corners, the two women alighted from the coach and found Lotos, panting and covered with dust, standing at the step waiting for them. And there was no one else waiting for them. They went into the store and sat forlornly on two very straight chairs while the storekeeper, who was also postmaster, assorted the mail. In a few moments the store was crowded. Everybody came there when the mail arrived, and everybody went through the form of asking for a letter. There may be no one in the wide world who will be likely to write to you, but there is a certain interest and excitement, if you live in the country, in going to the office and asking, "Is there anything for me?" No—but perhaps there will be something to-morrow. The very sight of the envelopes in the man's hand as he shuffles them over is like a faint electric shock. What is there in them?

Wilhelmina and her mother sat there waiting. They did not know but Cousin Rawdon would come—indeed, Mrs. Armstrong expected him; but as for the girl, she could not have said that she expected anything.

"You see," said her mother, leaning forward and whispering, "I b'lieve he has to drive four or five miles, and when a man has to come as far as that he may not be right on time."

But as the moments passed she grew restless. Every one who came into the store looked at the strangers. One woman, with a thin, inquiring face, came up and asked if they had friends at The Junction. Mrs. Armstrong drew herself up and said they were "expecting a friend."

"'Cause I was goin' to say," was the response, "that there ain't no hotel here, but I take folks that want to stay over night. Somebody had to take in transients, and my husband's dead 'n' I thought I'd do it. I live right across—that house painted drab."

Having spoken thus, the woman turned immediately away, as if afraid that she might be thought to be soliciting; she absorbed herself in watching some very slow molasses run into a tin can she had brought which a half-grown boy was holding under a faucet.

"I suppose there must be a connection between having a husband dead and taking in transients," remarked Wilhelmina to her mother, who only said "Hush!" in an anxious whisper.

Then the two fell to watching the people again. The hamlet stood on table-land—the stage had been climbing towards it for the last few miles—the store door opened towards the west, which seemed far away, as if the world were a very large place indeed, with spaces immeasurable. The sun was in a great vault of cloudless western sky. There were ranges of distant hills under the sun, and the sun appeared to be moving, not towards its setting, but to reach those hills.

A woman came hurrying in, the first person who had not glanced at these two in the straight chairs. She had a deep line between her eyebrows, and her lips were shut tight.

"Have you heard anything, Mis' Wattles?" inquired a man who was sitting on the counter.

The woman shook her head, without pausing on her way to the opening through which the mail was passed.

"Is there a letter for me?" she asked, shrilly. "Ain't none? Wall, I'm expectin' one from Boxton; I want it quick 's it comes, 'cause there'll be a death in it."

She went out as she had come in, almost running in her haste.

Wilhelmina felt a horrible inclination to laugh, which she strangled; then her eyes stung with some abortive tears.

The man sitting on the counter, who was now paring an apple with an extremely large jack-knife, looked at the girl, and said, slowly:

"You heard her? Thought so. She's be'n comin' into this office 'n' askin' that same question every day for more'n a year. Son died sudden in Boxton more'n a year ago—'ain't be'n right sence. Folks hate to take her to the 'sylum—seems harmless. Are you expectin' of any one?"

"Yes," answered the girl, and she added nothing to this monosyllable. The man carefully quartered the apple, impaled one segment of the fruit on the point of his knife, and thrust knife and apple deep into his mouth. He crunched two or three times, and then asked:

"Who?"

"Mr. Rawdon Meloon."

"That so?"

Wilhelmina nodded while she intently watched the insertion of another apple quarter.

Would a corner of the mouth be slit by that knife-edge, which looked keen? Apparently not.

"Relation?" was the next utterance.

"Distant."

"Oh!"

When the apple had been devoured, the man snapped his knife shut and crossed the short space between him and the post-office.

"I say, Bill, is there anything here for Meloon? These women are waiting for him."

"There's a letter. He 'ain't been over for two or three days."

"Le's see it."

This was evidently not a remarkable request, for the letter was handed out; the man took it to Mrs. Armstrong and held it before her.

"Know that?" he asked.

Mrs. Armstrong jumped.

"Why, it's my own letter!" she exclaimed.

"You see, Meloon hasn't got it, so he ain't expectin' ye."

The man carried the missive and redeposited it in the care of the United States to await the coming of its owner.

"Oh," cried the elder woman, turning to her companion, "what shall we do now?"

"Go across the road and be transients until to-morrow."

The man who had made this discovery was shouted at by some one who drove up in front of the building, and he was compelled to leave. He had hardly gone before a pair of large gray horses attached to a hay-rigging were pulled in at the door. A compact looking man, with a broad, flat back, wearing a buttoned-up blue swallow-tailed coat, walked in, planting his feet squarely as he entered. His face was smooth, save for an immense grizzled mustache—a regular "plunger's mustache"—that curled away over his cheeks.

He nodded here and there, but he didn't pause until he reached the postal window. A letter was handed out to him, and at the same time the man said:

"Ladies here waitin' for you."

"Ladies?"

The new-comer turned about quickly and stared at the two, who stared back. A little tremor came over the elder woman.

"It can't be," she said in a whisper, blushing as she spoke.

The stranger glanced down at the letter; he tore off the envelope, but took a step forward as he did so. Then he doffed his hat, revealing thick, half-gray hair tossed up from his forehead.

"One of you must be Cousin Serissa," he said; "now which is she?"

He thrust the unread sheet of paper into his coat-pocket and extended his hand to Mrs. Armstrong, who took it, saying, unsteadily:

"You do have Rawdon Meloon's way of smiling."

"But nothing else that was his? Now I know you. But who's this that might be you twenty years ago—you with a difference? Is this Billy—Billy Armstrong?"

The girl also flushed; the hearing that name made her blood stir quicker.

"Mother doesn't call me Billy," she said. "Father and—some others called me that. How could you know?" glancing up at the bright eyes fixed on her.

"Oh, I know a lot of things," was the response, "but I never tell how I find them out."

As he spoke he shook hands warmly.

He turned and glanced through the door where the gray horses were standing.

"You see I hadn't hoped you'd come so soon. I s'pose you can't go home in a hay-rigging. Too fine for that, aren't you?"

"It's no matter," began Mrs. Armstrong; "we don't want to begin by being any trouble."

"We can go in a hay-rigging perfectly well," remarked Miny.

"I came over in this because I want the tires reset," said Mr. Meloon, "but if I'd known you were to be here I'd have come in something else. I've got a barouche, we call it—one my grandfather had. I'd have enjoyed driving over in that."

He gave such a hearty laugh that the people standing about laughed with him.

"'Ain't seen you in that barouche this thirty year, Mr. Meloon," said one.

"No, of course you haven't. My wife wouldn't ride in it, and the pretty girls I might have asked have all gone away."

"Ha! ha!" from the men grouped about. The women smiled; Billy looked with a growing curiosity at her mother's third cousin, who now tramped to the door, glanced at the long, springless cart that stood there, and then said, aloud:

"If I only had a few bundles of straw."

"How will a couple of chairs do?"

"Guess they'll have to do. Who'll lend 'em to me?"

The storekeeper hurried up-stairs where he lived and brought down two chairs like those already occupied by the strange women. In a few moments more Mrs. Armstrong and her daughter were sitting in the cart, their one big trunk behind them, Lotos at the girl's feet, and the stalwart man in the blue coat standing in front, driving the horses down a pitch of hill which led out of the village. Already also the chairs had begun to slide forward, and presently, as they began to ascend a slope, they slid backward. Lotos, at the first slackening of the trot, leaped off the end of the cart. The girl, watching, longed to follow him.

It is a serious thing to sit on a chair that goes at its own demoniac will back and forth on the bottom of a long hay-rigging across a hilly country.

For a half hour the two women bore this in silence. Their driver was greatly occupied with his horses, which pulled strongly on the reins.

At last Wilhelmina stood up, and, holding fast by a stake, she leaned forward and touched the man's arm. He turned quickly, and the absent look on his face showed that he had, for the time, forgotten his companions.

"Mr. Meloon," said the girl, "if you please, we'll get out and walk."

"Walk? What for?"

"Just to save our lives. These chairs are little fiends."

Meloon pulled in the horses. He laughed; his eyes had twinkles in them when he laughed, and the ends of his mustache nearly touched his ears.

"Jump out, then," he said, "and I'll take along the plunder. Whoa! Sh!" as the horses made a movement.

And Wilhelmina made the leap that Lotos had taken before her, and then she helped her mother.

"How far is it now?" she asked.

Meloon glanced about him.

"We've been three miles—it's just two now. Are you good for it?"

"Good for ten—just from sheer gratitude to be out of those chairs," answered the girl, gayly.

"Straight road till you come to a gate that I'll leave open. You can't miss it."

These words were called out over the man's shoulder as the horses dashed on.

The two women walked slowly at first, the elder glancing now and then with a furtive curiosity at her daughter.

After a while they came to one of the chairs, which had fallen as the cart had ascended a hill. Lotos sniffed at it. Wilhelmina set it upright and put her mother on it.

"You look tired," she said, and she leaned upon the back, gazing off upon the hills.

Mrs. Armstrong sighed.

"I wonder what you think of him, Miny," she remarked, "and I wonder how we sh'll get along. I feel kind of—kind of skittish about it, somehow. He's changed a lot, but his eyes 'n' his voice are the same. I never did see such a mustache, did you?—only on them Russian officers sometimes that we used to meet in them parks in Paris. 'Tain't much like Paris, is it?"

V

ARRIVAL

AS she heard her mother's question Wilhelmina turned towards her with an impetuous movement, which she instantly subdued.

"No," she said, "it's not a bit like Paris. If you're rested we'll go on. These hills are hard for you."

They went on in silence. On a long, level space where they walked easily, Mrs. Armstrong suddenly caught at her daughter's hand, and exclaimed:

"Try a note here, Miny! The air is so clear and bracing; try a note here!"

A flash came to the girl's eyes, and a swift-going quiver to her lips; but flash and quiver were so soon gone that her mother was not sure they had been.

"I'm tired and out of breath, mother," was the reply.

Mrs. Armstrong sighed again.

"Yes, I s'pose you are; I hadn't ought to have mentioned it. I guess we c'n go on now, can't we?"

They resumed their walk.

"When you get rested, Miny," said the mother, after a few moments, "I shouldn't wonder if you'd want to try a note—should you wonder?"—wistfully.

"I can't tell; we needn't think of that."

"No," acquiescingly; "we needn't think of that."

A quarter of a mile was traversed. The sun was now shining level upon their faces. The damp, penetrating odors of the coming night were rising from the valleys. The road was entirely solitary, save for these two women and the dog.

Mrs. Armstrong glanced around her; no one was in sight. She turned to her companion and flung her arms about her, crying out as she did so:

"It does seem as if I couldn't bear it, Miny! 'Tain't much use trying to bear it, is it? I thought you'd be a *prima donna* by this time. They said you would —they all said you would!"

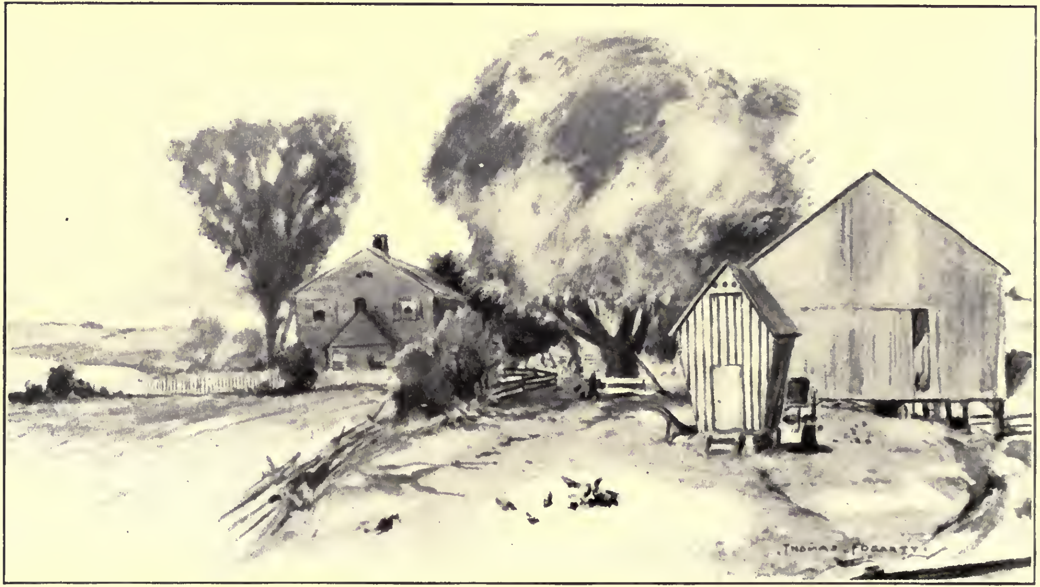
"But you never wanted me to be a *prima donna*, mother."

"That's neither here nor there. It's what you wanted—it's what you wanted. Won't you try a note now? The air is so pure and bracing; won't you?"

The girl was holding her mother closely with one arm. The other hand she raised to her throat and pressed it there.

"I can't," she said, hoarsely. "I don't dare to try —and yet I'd give the world if I dared. Mother," with an abrupt change of manner, "how foolish we are. Let us talk of Cousin Rawdon Meloon," smiling. "We're going to be his housekeepers, you and I; and I'm never, never in this world to be a *prima donna*. But I may have one ambition—I may try to return that money that Miss Runciman flung away on me. It 'll be a long pull, but if I last till I'm an old woman, I can, perhaps, do it. I'm not going to think about anything else; but you, little mother, you may pray, and read books about the coming of the Lord, and on these hills you may watch for His coming. As for me, I haven't decided that there is any Lord."

"Wilhelmina!" sharply.


THOMAS FOGARTY

THE MELOON FARM

"Come," phlegmatically, "let us go on."

The younger woman led the older by the hand, and soon they came to the gate which Meloon had mentioned. It stood open and led into a long lane, at the end of which, a mile away, they saw a large red house with barns and corn-barns in the rear, and a long, open shed attached to the house.

"That must be the place," said Wilhelmina, in a business-like voice, "and if we suit our employer we'll live there for a while. I shall make the butter and do the hardest of the work; I'll be your maid. Come on. Cousin Rawdon Meloon is a man I haven't made up my mind about."

An hour later the two had changed their dusty clothes and were slowly descending the stairs that led into the hall.

At the sound of their footsteps a door below was flung open and Meloon appeared. He stood waiting. He seemed taller and more square in the house than he had seemed out-of-doors.

"You've done rather well," he said, as they approached; "you've got through 'prinking'—is that the word?—sooner than I expected. There's not a woman on the premises besides yourselves, and hasn't been since my wife died. I thought I'd have a vacation from them," laughing. "Not but that they're useful. I'm ready to give up housework now. It's a pull on a man to have to sweep and dust; not that I've done much of it. I hate to have to wring out a dish-cloth; I always feel as if I wanted to fling it at somebody's head; I used occasionally to throw it at Trooper, but he didn't mind. He would pick up the wet rag and bring it to me—didn't you, boy?"

Meloon extended his hand towards a dimly seen bulk that lay at the end of the hall. This bulk tardily arose and came forward, revealing that it was a yellow St. Bernard with a black muzzle.

"He's so old now that he doesn't take much notice of visitors; he thinks I can take care of 'em myself. He's got a growl or two left, though, hasn't he?" as Trooper caught sight of Lotos, who was standing just outside the open door. The two dogs stood looking at each other, muttering and bristling; then Trooper thought better of it, wagged his tail, and gave permission for Lotos to enter, which he did immediately, and began to sniff everywhere.

"I hardly know where to take you," said Meloon; "each room is worse than the other. We'll try this," walking forward through an open door. "It's getting dark now, and you can't see how horribly a womanless man lives. Find chairs if you can, and I'll make a blink of fire on the hearth. Then I'll kill a chicken and fry it for you; I s'pose you're starved."

The two women had followed their host into a room whose blinds were shut. Wilhelmina stumbled against something which gave out a melodious twang. Meloon sprang forward.

"I guess you're walking on my fiddle," he said, catching up an object and carefully putting it on a chair.

"Better stand still till I bring a light, after all. There's a piano here somewhere; don't run against it. Here, can't you see to sit down?"

He drew a match from his waistcoat-pocket, scraped it across the sole of his boot, then held it up while his guests hurriedly sat down in the first empty chairs they could find. The tiny flame revealed chaos, then went out.

"Don't stir while I'm gone," was the command.

The two women heard Meloon's footsteps clash away on the bare floor; then an opening and slamming of doors in some remote part of the house, and after a moment the shrill and distant cries of fowl.

"Did you see what a looking place this room is?" asked Mrs. Armstrong, in a whisper.

"Yes; but why does he have a fiddle and a piano?"

"Oh, he's real musical; at least, he used to be."

The girl drew a deep breath, but she said nothing.

They seemed to wait a long time there in the darkness—so long, in fact, that they began to wonder if they had been forgotten. They remembered that they were hungry; possibly they were assisted in this remembrance by a faint odor of frying chicken, which gradually diffused itself through the house.

"Perhaps he will eat the chicken and never think of us," remarked Wilhelmina at last.

"There were two crackers left in my handbag," murmured her mother.

"And the handbag was left in the cart," was the response.

Five minutes more passed, and then more tramping and slamming were heard, this time approaching. Meloon entered with a dingy lamp in one hand, and on his other arm a load of wood. He put wood and lamp on the hearth and knelt down beside them. He began whittling kindlings from a pine stick, not noticing any one. These shreds of wood he arranged artfully, put a lighted match to them, then sat back on his heels to watch the success of his fire-making. Without removing his eyes from the growing blaze, he made this inquiry:

"Would you two mind eating off one plate?"

"Not in the least—so that we may eat," promptly, from Miny.

"That's what I thought," carefully putting on small pine sticks so that the flames curled up among them. "I find I have but one really clean plate left besides the platter where the chicken is going. For myself, I'm past needing a plate; fingers and thumbs have been good enough for me. But I've lots of cups; you shall each have a cup for your coffee, and each a spoon. I'm going to bring the whole spread right in here now, for this, I've decided, is the best-looking place in the house."

Here the speaker rose from his knees and glanced about him as the big blaze revealed every part of the room. It was desolate with thick-lying dust, and piled with newspapers, books, and sheets of music.

In the dust on the once-polished top of the piano were long paths made by the dragging of books across it; over the piece of furniture apparently made to hold sheet-music were a pair of pantaloons and a coat.

"It does need dusting," remarked the man. Mrs. Armstrong gasped, but she said nothing.

"I took up the carpet, because I felt more freedom on a bare floor," said Mr. Meloon. "A man can scuff round easier on boards. But I must go back to my chicken."

Before leaving the room, however, he turned to a table loaded with papers and books; these he swept off with a wide, comprehensive gesture of his arm, and they fell in a heap. A fragment of rosin rolled forward so close to the fire that it began to melt.

This time Meloon returned directly, bearing his platter of smoking-hot chicken and his one plate turned down over it. He went back for coffee, cream, and cups, and then they all ate and drank, at first hungrily and in silence. The plate was piled full and set on Mrs. Armstrong's knees. Trooper, the St. Bernard, came solemnly and somewhat stiffly and sat by his master's elbow, taking bones and swallowing them with mysteriously little chewing. As for Lotos, he stood near his mistress, watching and drooling with unconcealed impatience, snatching at what she gave him.

Wilhelmina wondered why her spirits began to rise, but coffee and food often produce what seems a spiritual effect.

The fire roared on the hearth; it was not cold without, but there was a chill in the house which these flames dispelled.

"I just perceive," said Meloon, "that there is no bread. Have you missed bread, Cousin Serissa?"

"Yes," she replied, hesitatingly.

"Too bad. I baked bread yesterday. It was flour, and water, and saleratus. After I put it in the oven I forgot it. This morning I remembered it, but to me it did not look appetizing, so I forgot it again. Indian meal I have subdued, but flour—well, I mean to buy bread when I go to The Junction, but the baker comes there only once a week, and I don't often find any left. The people at The Junction seem to look upon baker's bread as a treat, like ice-cream—they gobble it up before I can get there."

Mrs. Armstrong was now sitting in a rocker, and her daughter was on a "cricket" at her feet.

Meloon was bolt upright in a chair that did not look strong enough to hold him. The firelight was bright on the group. The man's eyes dwelt on his guests as he talked. His dog was beside him, and his hand was often on the yellow head.

The girl gazed into the fire. She was not thinking; she was basking like an animal who has just been fed and who is warm. She hardly listened to what was said; she did not care. In a few moments she would be sleepy; she wondered if she and her mother would be left to sleep on the floor in that room; they could cover themselves with their shawls and put their heads on a pile of papers. Perhaps she had already grown drowsy, for she must be dreaming that she heard some one calling her "Billy."

She started and gazed confusedly at Meloon. He gazed back at her and smiled.

"It was I who called you Billy," he said.

VI

HOW IT WENT

THE girl rose to her feet quickly with a curious air, as if she had been summoned by some one. She stood an instant, and then walked to the mantel, where she leaned an arm. The blaze had died down, leaving a heap of ruddy coals.

"I guess you've been asleep, Miny," said her mother.

Miny put her hand to her forehead.

"Yes," she responded, "and I dreamed that I was kneeling in front of the tower in that scene with Manrico, and—" She roused herself. "How silly of me to tell a dream! I hate to have people tell dreams."

Meloon's long legs were stretched out towards the hearth, and while Wilhelmina was speaking he had been looking at his feet. Now he raised his eyes as he said:

"I was there—I was in New York that night, and in the fifth seat from the orchestra, at the left hand. I wondered who it was that had taken that other singer's place. I thought you a bold piece to try to be Leonora after that other. But you didn't look bold; you were shrinking and afraid. I tell you I was interested. You took a tug right at my heart-strings. I'll bet there wasn't a man in the audience that didn't feel that tug. How that fellow in the tower did sing at you! I found out who he was later. I didn't blame him; I'd have sung so, too, if I could I don't know why I have such a bull-frog of a voice. I didn't wonder that the people rose at you. I asked who you were, and they said you were Billy Armstrong, a *protégée* of the Runciman. I said to myself: 'She'll do—we'll hear from her some day.' I came back to the farm here the next day, and I haven't been forty miles away from it since. I read the papers now and then, and I used to look for a word about you; then I forgot. There isn't much use in remembering. Your face that night made me think of something, I never could tell what, till I saw you and your mother together over at The Junction to-day; then I knew you had a bit of a look like Serissa when she was young, but I never thought of your belonging to her, though I knew she married a fellow named Armstrong. Of course I knew that no child of Serissa's could by any chance get on to an opera stage. Odd, isn't it, that just the things we know can't happen do happen."

Meloon drew up his feet and crossed his legs, clasping his hands over one knee. Billy's eyes were fixed upon him, but he was gazing into the fire. He tossed up his head to throw back that thick lock of grizzled hair that had a trick of falling forward.

Now that the flames had ceased to make such a glare in the rooms, the lines in the man's face were less visible, but the sort of granite aspect of his features came out still more.

"For instance," he went on, "I could have sworn that the girl who took Leonora's part that night wouldn't ever come out to the Meloon farm to help do my housework—and here she is. Sometimes I think it's quite worth while to keep on living just to see what will happen; then, again, I think it doesn't pay. Serissa," turning quickly towards the little figure that seemed to shrink farther and farther into the rocker, "what do you say?—does it pay?"

The woman clasped her hands as she answered in an intense voice:

"Oh yes, it pays just to be here in the world and see what the Lord will do with you—and maybe the Lord will come while you are living here. Just think of that! To be able to see Him with your mortal eyes—see Him in all His glory descending from the heavens with the angels about Him!"

The girl moved uneasily as she heard these words, but she did not glance towards the speaker.

But Meloon did more than glance; he turned squarely in his chair and stared at the faded face that had once taken his fancy; but it had been more than a thousand years ago that he had had this fancy.

"Do you go into trances, Serissa?" he asked, with some roughness.

"Trances? No, I guess not—I don't know," rousing herself with some difficulty.

Meloon continued to gaze at her for a moment longer; then he resumed his old position and looked up at the girl by the mantel.

"Why did you stop singing, Billy?" he inquired. He had a quite direct way of putting questions, and an apparent ignorance of the fact that possibly some questions were better unasked.

There was a perceptible space of time before the answer came. Mrs. Armstrong's face became anxious; she fidgeted.

"Because I lost my voice," replied Billy.

"But I want her to try a note now she has come here," cried Mrs. Armstrong, eagerly. "I was asking her when we were walking up if she wouldn't try a note. The air is so clear and bracing. Something happened in her throat, but you can't tell when it 'll be all right again. I tell her likely 's not it 'll be all right just as sudden as it happened. Don't you think so, Cousin Rawdon?"

"I don't know," said Meloon—"I don't know anything about it." He raised his hand and struck it sharp down on his knee. "I vow," in a great voice—"I vow, that was devilish! Tell me about it, Billy. Were you in public?—did it go back on you in public?"

"Oh, don't ask her!" in a murmur from the mother.

"Yes, I shall ask her, too; it's no use wincing. Put your finger down hard on a sore place and it doesn't hurt so bad. Were you in public, Billy?"

The girl left the fireplace and began walking about the room as if movement were imperative.

Her mother had never dared to speak of that time.

Meloon turned and threw his arm over the back of his chair that he might the better watch Billy as she tramped quickly, turning aside for the piles of things on the floor. Her hands were clasped behind her; she was white, and her eyes shone.

"Never mind, Miny," said her mother, timidly; but the girl did not seem to hear her. Lotos rose from some newspapers on which he had been lying, and trailed along after his mistress, remonstrantly, but as if he must follow.

"In public," said Billy to herself, instead of to her companions. "Oh yes; everything was as humiliating as possible. It was at Milan. Marchesi said

I could sing—I was ready—not that I had learned everything, but enough; only I must keep on learning. It was a magnificent chance — the manager pleaded with me. I was frightened at first when the time came, but I got over that. I sang gloriously —my voice obeyed me; yes, my very soul sang. It was an experience to give one wings. I could have soared to heaven. And the people who heard me were wild with enthusiasm; it was victory, intoxication, glory. I came out for the last time feeling that I could sing anything—as I had always longed to sing. The orchestra dwindled to the violins, which were to accompany me. I walked forward towards the footlights and opened my lips. A kind of hoarse croak came from them; it was as if something had spun itself across my throat in the very instant that my lips parted. There was a curious movement throughout the house, which instantly broke into tumultuous applause.

"I saw Marchesi's face in a box at my right; I saw it the instant before she put her fan up over it.

"When the applause had subsided I tried again to find a note. That same hoarse croak. The violins rose louder; then the orchestra clashed forth at its noisiest. The audience was silent.

"I stood an instant there, blind and deaf. Then I walked towards the wing, and somebody — I never knew who it was—caught my hand and led me somewhere.

"There was a cluster of forms about me, and I heard some one say:

"'Of course, it's only temporary. A sudden cold.'

"And some one else replied:

"'Only temporary.'

"I drank some hot bouillon from a cup held to my lips, and somebody fanned me until I took the fan and said:

"'I'm not warm.'

"I broke the fan and dropped it on the floor. I was quiet, though. I didn't rave. I wouldn't forgive myself if I had raved. I'm always thankful for that. I went to our lodgings with my mother. That was nearly a year ago."

When she ceased speaking Billy walked back to the mantel and again took up her position there. Lotos sat down on his haunches at her feet, and gazed into the fire with a melancholy air.

Meloon's eyes were fixed undisguisedly on the girl. At last he said:

"Of course, it wasn't a sudden cold."

"No."

"Oh, Miny!" in a low wail from the mother; but no one appeared to hear this wail.

"What was it, then?"

"I don't know; I suppose it was what people call fate. Mother says it is the Lord."

"It wasn't the Lord, either," emphatically from Meloon. "It's far more likely to be the devil."

The speaker crossed and recrossed his legs with some violence of movement. Billy continued to stand by the mantel somewhat as if she were a spectator of herself.

"And what did you do then?" he asked, after a moment.

"I told you I went home to our lodgings."

"And after?"

"After? Oh, nothing; just nothing!"

"But didn't you try to get back your voice?"

"Yes, I tried."

"Without success?"

"Without success."

Meloon now yielded to his heretofore restrained desire to rise and walk about. He sprang up and took two or three steps, kicking a chair out of his way. He went the length of the room and returned, taking up a position on the other side of the fireplace.

"It 'll come back," he said, in a loud, assertive tone. There was no reply.

"I tell you," he repeated, "it 'll come back, perhaps just as suddenly as it went—any minute—who knows?—perhaps it's there now!"

"That's what I tell her," eagerly from Mrs. Armstrong. "I want her to try a note. The air is so clear here—and it's a change, you know, and—oh, Miny, if you'd only try a note!"

Billy shook her head; but there was a flush coming to her face, a sparkle to her eyes.

Meloon turned quickly away. He picked up a green baize bag from the floor in a corner of the room; it was the same thing that Billy had stumbled against. He drew out the violin and began twanging the strings. No one spoke while he screwed and twanged, until, when the fiddle was tuned, he raised his eyes to the girl's face and said:

"Now—the scale!"

His strong, masculine glance commanded even more than his words.

Mrs. Armstrong leaned forward, her hands clasped, her features tense. She seemed to be murmuring something, perhaps a prayer.

As for Billy, she had withdrawn her arm from the shelf and stood upright, her eyes on Meloon's eyes, her head slightly raised.

"Now—the scale!" repeated Meloon.

VII

A HIRED GIRL

THE fiddle-bow went with sonorous softness along the notes.

The light that had gradually been growing upon Billy's face flashed out more fully, but it died instantly when she opened her lips to emit a hoarse travesty of the sound that was still lingering on the violin strings.

To her mother's strained gaze her daughter's face seemed actually to become black, as despair is called black.

In the silence that fell upon the group, Meloon's hand, with the bow in it, dropped to his side. Mrs. Armstrong had covered her face with her hands; as for Billy, she was standing in precisely the same attitude which she had taken when she had essayed the note; even her lips were still parted, but she had ceased to see the man opposite her. After a moment she turned and walked out of the room. Just as she was closing the door her mother reached her side.

"Let me go with you, Miny!" she pleaded.

"No," was the harsh response.

But the brindled dog pushed roughly by the two women, and was without the door when his mistress shut the latch with a decided movement.

Mrs. Armstrong turned away, wringing her hands.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" she cried. "What will she do? Where will she go?"

"Do? She won't do anything," was the abrupt response from Meloon; "and as for going anywhere, there's nowhere to go. It won't do her any harm to wander about the country here."

"She'll get lost!"

"Pooh!"

Meloon sat down heavily and thrust his hands deep into his trousers pockets; he frowned into the fire.

"Let her alone more!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Serissa, don't notice her."

"Not notice her? I can't help it. You don't know what you're talking about, Cousin Rawdon. I wish you hadn't made her try a note."

"I thought you wanted her to try."

"Yes; so I did. I don't know what I'm talking about."

Silence, during which the two were listening intently. They both heard the outer door open; after that it was perfectly still, save for the murmur of insects.

Mrs. Armstrong watched the clock; when the hands had gone over the space of ten minutes she rose like one distracted.

"I'm going to find my child," she said, in a loud tone.

Meloon rose also.

"Can't you understand," he said, "that she wants to be alone? And there's nothing to hurt her. She isn't afraid of sheep, is she?—or of a stray calf? Let her get her balance. I swear it's too bad!" The speaker pulled at his mustache. "And she was such a Leonora!"

"Think of the dew! It must be sopping wet in the grass."

"She won't know it. Well, if you insist, I'll go myself. Sit down, Serissa. Whatever you do, don't get hysterical. Billy isn't a child; and she hasn't gone out to shoot herself, either; or jump into a pond. I say," as Mrs. Armstrong hurried towards the door again, "you sha'n't go, for then I shall have two women to hunt up instead of one, and one's enough—one's quite enough."

The man looked about the room for his hat, could not find it, and left the house without it.

As he reached the outer door he had an inclination to turn the key in the lock, and thus make tolerably sure that Mrs. Armstrong would not institute a search on her own account. But he did not turn it.

He went down the walk muttering that he was an idiot, a donkey. What was a house with no regular meals, no sweeping, no dish-washing, everything in a heap; what was all that to having two women ready to fly into fits—that was the disrespectful phrase he used—under his roof? He must have been worse than crazy when he had written that letter to Serissa.

He paused a few rods from the house and listened.

Where was that girl? It was infernally rough on her, but he wished that she hadn't rushed out in this way, and the mother going on in the house. It seemed, indeed, as if he were to have unquiet times; it was his own fault. But how in the world was a man to tell what women would do?

He was trying to decide which way he should go when he heard a window thrown up, and then Mrs. Armstrong called:

"Cousin Rawdon, have you found her?"

"Oh, the devil!" cried Meloon in a whisper; and then aloud: "Not yet; give me a little more time. I tell you nothing can happen to her here."

He walked on; for all he knew he might as well turn in one direction as another. It was absurd, anyway, their running after her. She would come back when she pleased, and when he did find her she would probably hate him for coming. At this thought Meloon grinned to himself as he strode through the wet grass. It made little difference to him if all the women in the world hated him; not but what they were useful—they seemed to be made to wash dishes and take the dust from the tops of furniture, and such things as that. But he had made a mistake in sending for Cousin Serissa, since her daughter turned out to be this kind of a person. He had thought she was just such a girl as he saw down at The Junction: one who put on a clean print gown in the afternoon, took her hair out of the crimping-pins, and had a tight frizzle across her forehead as she sat at the window watching the "passing," and crocheting elaborate edging for petticoats, but crocheting with an eye for the young men who drove up to the post-office and store.

Why hadn't Serissa told him in that letter she sent him what sort of a creature her daughter was? But then he recalled that he hadn't read the letter until after he had the two safely in his house; then he had glanced through it while he watched the chicken frying for their supper. And where in the world were they going to sleep? This question came to him with great suddenness and force. He stopped in his walk and ran over in his mind the different rooms. There were beds enough, but for all he knew they were moldy with dampness.

"I wish I might bundle them both off to-morrow," he said, aloud. "Serissa doesn't look strong enough to lift a kettle off the stove; and as for the girl"—he whistled a shrill bar—"I'm sorry for her; but I didn't import a couple of women just to be sorry for 'em."

He had reached the end of a lane that led upward from the back of the barn. The moon was rising from behind one of the eastern hills; it showed half a dozen cows lying in a group near the fence; Meloon could see the dew glisten on their backs; some of them were chewing their cuds, turning calm, reflective eyes on their master.

He stood there a moment looking at them; he advanced and rubbed his fingers in the dish-like hollow of one face, saying, in a half voice, as he did so:

"We c'n get along without humans well enough—can't we, Molly? So—so—we c'n get along."

The cow reached forward and rubbed the side of her nose on Meloon's arm.

Presently he walked off, now going quickly until he reached an eminence in the field. From the top of this he gazed all about, the moon showing in black relief the trees and the house with its barns and sheds. It showed also a huddle of sheep in the lee of a long building. They were lying as motionless as if they had been carved, and could not move. The air was now somewhat chilly, but was sweet with damp odors of growing bayberry and ferns. Nothing could be more peaceful or more symbolical of innocence. Perhaps Meloon had some such thought as that, which he rejected by the sudden exclamation:

"Pshaw! It doesn't really mean anything. For all the looks of things, there might be a murderer behind every tree."

He turned himself about so that he might see in another direction. This time he became aware of a figure two fields distant, in what he called the "west pasture." This figure seemed walking rapidly away from the house, walking not desultorily, but apparently with a purpose.

Meloon stood an instant.

"Now, here's a go," he thought. "Be hanged if I like to chase a woman round in this manner, as if she were a stray heifer."

He ran down the slope and across the intervening meadow. He went with long strides, not minding the young willows, but crashing in among them and trampling them down. When he had vaulted over a fence and was in the west pasture, he stopped to look about him again. Some birch-trees had impeded his view; he had supposed that the figure was by this time far over the field. Emerging, dew-sprinkled, from the birches, he almost collided with Billy, who was running towards him, followed by her dog. She drew up just in time to prevent herself from falling into his arms.

"Oh!" she cried, and then stood panting.

She was evidently greatly excited, and as evidently struggling for self-control.

Meloon remained silent, looking at the girl, whose eyes were lowered and whose hands were shut tight, hanging at her sides. She was perfectly quiet in that way that indicates excitement.

"It was very kind of you to come after me," she said, at last; "but there wasn't the slightest need, Mr. Meloon."

"That's what I told your mother, that there was no need," was the response. "But she was coming if I didn't; then, you see, after a while I should have felt it my duty to look you both up. I said to myself, better one than two—and here I am."

"Yes," responded Billy, giving an indefinite glance around her.

"There might have been a bad-minded bull hereabouts," now remarked Meloon. "I've often read that it was proper to have an infuriated bull on a rampage when a heroine strolled in a field."

"But I'm not a heroine."

"Not? You have some of the symptoms."

Meloon wondered what he was saying and how much of a fool he was making of himself. He raised his hand to his head, intending to draw his hat on more firmly; he discovered that he was bareheaded.

"Bless my soul!" he cried. "Didn't I put on any hat?" He ran his fingers through his thick hair, which was now damp. "I must be a demented old idiot. Let's go back to the house, Billy. You're not going to ask me to call you Miss Armstrong, are you?"

"Oh no, no."

The two began walking slowly. When they had gone a few rods the girl stopped; her companion stopped also.

"I don't want you to think I'm given to this kind of thing," she said.

"It would be inconvenient," he responded.

"Very," dryly; "and I sha'n't keep it up. You ought not to have made me try a note, as mother calls it."

Her tone was not even bitter. "However, I've had my lesson. Mr. Meloon, I'll begin house-cleaning to-morrow. I can make the best butter you ever tasted. I'm as strong as a young ox. I'm telling you these things now because I want you to pay me as much as any housework-girl gets. I think mother can do enough to earn her own board. I'm in debt, and I mean to pay my debts. Do you think you'd like to hire me?"

Meloon's surprise kept him silent for an instant. He had expected to find an hysterical girl, and had been tempted to run away from the encounter.

"You don't believe I'm able to do what I say?" she asked.

She was standing so that the moonlight fell upon her. Meloon had a feeling that he dared not be sorry for her, and yet he was sorry, although there was no emotion visible on her face.

"She's got pluck," he was thinking. Aloud he said:

"There are two families at The Junction who have hired help in the shape of girls — they give them each two dollars a week."

"Is that all? That won't be much more than a hundred dollars a year."

"I'll give you two and a half," hurriedly.

"No, you shall not; if that's all hired girls have, that's all I shall take. It's a pittance, though."

As she said this, Billy began to walk quickly again, and Meloon kept beside her. He was wondering and confused, and he was again calling himself an old idiot. In another moment they met Mrs. Armstrong hurrying distractedly towards them. She was wringing her hands.

"Miny," she said, in an unsteady voice, "I do wish you would be calm."

"Why, mother," said the girl, "I'm just as calm as—as this night." She came nearer and put an arm over her mother's shoulders. She glanced at Meloon as she said, with some severity: "I could have found my way back; I could see the house all the time. Because I've lost my voice, do you think I have also lost my wits?"

VIII

HOUSEWORK

WHEN Mr. Meloon awoke the next morning, he began at the same time to wonder what he should get himself for breakfast. Then he sat up in bed and sniffed.

Was that ham that he smelled—frying ham, and coffee? What did that mean? Oh—giving himself a shake—there were two women in the house; he hadn't been dreaming that, then. Could it be possible that they had already begun to be useful? They must be very clever, indeed, if they had been able to find the coffee-pot; it was more than a week since he had seen it; during that time he had made that beverage in many different vessels, but as he had washed none of them, his curiosity was all the more keen as to what the brew was made in just now. Urged by this feeling, he gave himself another shake and hurriedly dressed. For the first time in a long while he glanced into the mirror. He had formed the habit of shaving himself without really seeing his face. He could draw the keen edge of his blade over his cheeks and not see anything but the glittering steel and the gray stubble he was cutting.

Standing before the bit of a glass now, he reached out his hand for a brush and attacked the shock of hair. He grinned satirically at himself as he did so.

"Women in the house, old donkey," he said. "If they do get me decent meals I reckon I shall have to pay a great price in this sort of thing. My cows, and my horses, and my hired men don't care whether my hair is brushed or not; but womenkind are different—womenkind don't see below a man's skin."

He went down the back stairs, took two milk-pails that were turned over two stakes in the wood-room, and strode towards the cow-sheds, where the cows now stood in that peaceful calm which is characteristic of them.

Just as the milk began to ring into the pail between his knees, he thought he heard his name pronounced. His hands ceased their quick movement as he listened, his forehead pressed against the warm side of the Jersey.

"Mr. Meloon."

Billy was at the bars of the yard. The man lifted his head and turned it to see the girl in a calico gown and long apron, her sleeves pinned up at the elbows.

"Well?"

"Mother wants to know when you'll be ready for breakfast; and if you like your eggs fried soft or hard?"

"In twenty minutes—hard," was the response.

Before he began milking again he heard the sound of retreating footsteps.

"Yes," he said, "I like 'em hard, though I'm soft enough myself."

But no one save the Jersey heard this confession, and she would never betray it. She reached about and drew a rough tongue along the shoulder of Meloon's jumper.

"So, bossy, so," he said, gently.

There was a cleared space in the centre of the kitchen, and a table stood in this space when the master of the house entered a half-hour later. A table-cloth was visible. He gazed at it and at the plates and cups and saucers. He himself was shining as to his face and hands with soap and water; his enormous mustache was combed, curling out over his gaunt cheeks; there was a twinkle in his eyes, but deprecation in his manner.

"I can never live up to this—never," he said.

"Make an effort; we are to have napkins to-morrow. I couldn't find them this morning, though I looked under the stove, in the wood-box, and other places."

Billy was turning the eggs and she did not lift her head as she spoke. At that moment there flashed through her mind, as if from some other life, the memory of that day when she had cooked eggs for Leonora Runciman in her old home. She always had a way of calling her meeting with the *prima donna* the turning-point in her life. However, few of us know soon enough the real turning-point in our lives; though it is given to many to know it too late.

"Napkins?" repeated Meloon. "I've used the sleeve of my jumper so long that I doubt if I can take to anything else. Where did you find the coffee-pot?"

He was standing with his hands on the back of his chair gazing about the room.

"I haven't found it. I have made the coffee in a quart measure. Will you sit down and let me serve you, Mr. Meloon? And here are the eggs as hard as the heart of the world."

"You said he said he liked 'em hard," remarked

Mrs. Armstrong, in a rather worried manner as she took a towel from some muffins and brought them forward.

Meloon broke open a muffin. Then he looked up uneasily.

"If you two don't sit down and eat with me I shall be choked by a sense of elegance. I tell you I can't stand it."

"But you must; you pay me two dollars and a half a week so that you may stand it. I'm not above eating with you, though."

Billy saw her mother seated opposite their host; then she took her own place. Glancing at her, Meloon was not so blind that he could not see the dark circles of languor and fatigue under her eyes, though her lips were smiling in a mocking way that accorded with her words. She sipped her coffee. There was silence for a few moments. This silence was broken by Billy, who remarked:

"I suppose you have hired men, Mr. Meloon?"

"Five, at this time of year. It is haying. Do you want one?"

"Yes. I'm going to clean house, and I shall need a strong man to move things for me. I shall have no use for one who thinks he's too masculine to wash windows and scrub floors, and do woman's work. I shall not need him for several days, but I thought I would speak in time."

"I'll bear it in mind," was the response.

"Miny," said Mrs. Armstrong, when the two women were left alone, "do you think you're quite respectful to Cousin Rawdon?"

"Perfectly. I had to adopt some kind of a manner to him, so I chose his own."

"He's a different man from what I thought he was;

but then, I never did understand him. Don't you think he's kind of—well—kind of distinguished-looking, somehow?"

"I hadn't thought."

"I guess it must be his mustache. Don't you think it's his mustache, Miny?"

"Probably. I wish we could find something to clean silver with. These spoons might as well be iron."

"You see, he didn't use to wear a mustache when I knew him years ago."

Apparently Billy didn't hear these words. She was on her knees, and exploring in that place of darkness which is known by all housekeepers by the term "under the sink." Housekeepers also know that there are times when almost anything, from a silver cake-dish to a battered frying-pan may be found there. It gives a sense of infinite well-being to the feminine head of a house to know that under the sink is cleaned out, and that the neighbor who tells everything she sees might be allowed to explore in that recess.

"He didn't use to wear a mustache," repeated Mrs. Armstrong.

The girl's head was in this dark closet and her voice was muffled as she returned:

"Didn't he? I do believe that these are silver forks in this iron pot."

The two women washed dishes and scoured tin and silver all day; they scrubbed and swept all the next day. A subdued light of contentment came to Mrs. Armstrong's worn face, a light that took the place of the resigned expression she had worn all that time in Paris. In that brilliant, wicked place she was deprived of housework. It wasn't genuine housework to keep those two bits of rooms clean, and it was not real cooking over a toy thing with charcoal in it, or something hitched on to a gas-jet. But this large old farm-house—ah, here she could breathe deeply and be herself once more.

But Wilhelmina?—the mother formed a habit of glancing often and furtively at her daughter, who worked incessantly, turning her hand deftly to everything, seeming never to have an idle moment. And how cheerful Miny was! The mother was thankful for that. She watched sharply to see if this cheerfulness were put on; but if it were a mask she never saw beneath it. Sometimes in the night Mrs. Armstrong rose and crept softly to the girl's bed, and always found her sleeping soundly. Then the woman would go back as softly as she came, and lie awake praying joyfully and ecstatically.

It had been a great trial to her to have Miny want to learn to be an opera-singer; and Mrs. Armstrong had never believed in Leonora Runciman. It had all been wrong. The Lord did not approve of opera-singers, and it was the Lord himself who had taken away the girl's voice, thus saving her from becoming one of those creatures who sang, but did not sing praises.

There were moments when Mrs. Armstrong believed that Providence had done this thing in answer to her prayers. At these moments she was afraid lest her daughter should find this out. She had not asked God to take away Miny's singing voice, but she had asked Him to prevent her from becoming an opera-singer, and He had chosen His own way of doing it. In the very bottom of her heart Serissa Armstrong believed herself to be the cause of Miny's loss; this knowledge both exhilarated and frightened her. She felt that she held a mighty power—the power of prayer. She had also a dim idea that when the Lord came in the glory of His might she could explain to Him why she had asked this thing of Him. She walked about the house, working all the time, and all the time surrounded by a kind of cloud, which she saw, but which others could not see. It was real to her that she mixed dough, and baked bread, and washed floors, but still more real was this shining of light from heaven, this conviction that the King of heaven was preparing to come to earth, and that she must be ready.

"I must be ready."

This phrase repeated itself in her mind, and occasionally she pronounced it aloud. Having spoken it, she would look about her hastily lest some one might have heard her.

At last, when she had said it one day as she was making pies, some one suddenly asked behind her:

"What do you mean by that?"

Mrs. Armstrong was holding up a pie upon which she had just put the top crust; she was running a knife about the edge, and a spiral of dough was dropping towards the cake-board.

At that question the pie slid from her hand with a soft crash to the board. She turned about to see her cousin Rawdon standing close to the open buttery door.

Perhaps something in the woman's face made Meloon take a step towards her as he repeated the question:

"Serissa, what do you mean by that?"

She advanced towards him and laid one floury hand on his arm. Her eyes shone in a way that made it a slight effort for him to meet them, but he did meet them with strong, steady gaze.

"Don't you know," she whispered—"Rawdon, don't you know that He is coming, and that we must be ready?"

Meloon stood silent for an instant; then he answered, in a quiet, matter-of-fact way:

"If you are talking about God, I think you're mistaken. I didn't know you were a Millerite, Serissa. I've just brought in some of those early turnips; I wish you'd try 'em for dinner."

He turned and walked out of the kitchen. Mrs. Armstrong followed him to the outer door as if she would speak again, but she only stood there in silence, the sunshine falling on her rapt face. She heard her daughter at work sweeping up-stairs.

"She doesn't know, either," she exclaimed. "Oh, how shall I make them know?"

Lotos came sauntering up from a favorite napping-place under a syringa close by. He stretched and yawned, and then stood gazing at Mrs. Armstrong, inquiringly wagging his tail. All at once he raised his head higher, pricked up his ears, gave a short bark, and galloped away.

In the room above Billy was leaning from the window. She had a white sweeping-cap on her head; this cap had a broad frill all around it, which framed her face.

She had now been a long time, she thought, at the Meloon farm. She had never worked so hard in her life before, with her hands; and her hands had blistered and recovered, until now they were hardening without blistering. She was less pallid, and there were no dark marks under her eyes. She was hungry, in spite of herself, as she said; and every night when she went to bed she fell asleep directly. But sometimes she waked before light in those early summer mornings. She would get up and sit by the window and watch the day come; at such times something would seem to rise within her, something uncontrollable, and she would cry out to herself, "I think I could sing." But she did not try to sing.

Now, with her broom in her hand, she watched her dog as he ran across a field. That was the way he always ran at a tramp or a straggler. She looked farther and saw the erect, stalwart figure of Meloon walking in that field towards which the dog was running.

At the right, and approaching at a rapid pace, was another man, apparently in working clothes. Billy saw this man come near Meloon, and the latter pause to wait his arrival. Then she turned and resumed her sweeping.

IX

THE NEW HIRED MAN

MELOON, in the field, was thinking that his Cousin Serissa was a little weak in the upper story ; and had it really paid him to sow that piece at the north end of the potato-patch with carrots ?

. "Hullo, Lotos, going for a run with me ?"

The dog came to a sudden stop by his side, and then both man and dog watched the figure, who was, Meloon thought, his neighbor across the branch.

But no! "Who in the deuce is he ?" asked Meloon of himself.

A young man in rather new blue denim jumper and overalls, with a full beard, and a soft felt hat on his head. He had his hands in his pockets, but when Lotos came sniffing about him he put out a very white-looking hand towards him and gave a low whistle under his breath. The dog leaped to his shoulders, writhing and whining, and licking his face.

The young man presently thrust him aside, saying :

"That's enough — that'll do." He glanced at Meloon, who was gazing curiously at him.

"The dog seems to know you," he said.

There was no answer to this remark.

"I'm looking for work," said the stranger.

'Oh, you are?"

"Yes; I heard you had a large farm, and so I came to you."

"Haying's mostly over," said Meloon.

"But harvesting has hardly begun."

"That's true."

Meloon glanced at the man's hands, and the owner of them, seeing this glance, immediately hid them in his pockets again. But he drew them out directly, saying, with a laugh:

"I've not been farming lately."

"I should say not."

"But I can farm it if you'll only give me a chance."

"What wages do you expect?"

"Whatever you please to give me."

"That's odd. People aren't generally so considerate as that."

The new-comer saw that he had made a mistake in not finding out the ordinary price and asking it. He stood an instant undecided; then he said, hurriedly:

"Of course you know well enough that I'm not used to the business—in fact, I never did a stroke of such work in my life; but I'm well and strong and I want a try at it. Things haven't gone right with me; you'll guess that, too. I wish you could find it in your way to take me on. Give me my board and lodging; if you think I'm worth more, give me more."

The speaker held his head up and looked Meloon in the face. As for Meloon, he was rather surprised at himself that he immediately wished to say yes to this request. Ordinarily he did not find it hard to refuse to have anything to do with a tramp; he had no sympathy with tramps; on the contrary, he usually was inclined to kick them.

The great dog Trooper now came at a lumbering canter up to the group. Meloon watched with keen interest to see what Trooper would do. The dog's master had a habit of telling people that he would give a great deal for the mastiff's opinion of a stranger; and he would add with a laugh that if it went against his own, why, he gave up his impression and adopted that of the dog.

The animal advanced gravely, with an air as if his decision was of value; he held his tail stiffly upright while he gazed at the man; then he stepped nearer and smelled of the hand that was extended to him.

"Hullo, old fellow!" said the stranger.

The dog sniffed and gazed an instant longer; then his tail unbent; he swayed it gently to and fro, glanced at his master as if to say, "I don't think he's a bad sort"; whereupon he sat down on his haunches and contemplated the landscape.

Meloon laughed slightly. His eyes dwelt for an instant intently on the face before him.

"I can't help thinking it's a queer thing you want to work for me," he said. "What have you been doing?"

There was a slight hesitation before the answer came.

"Nothing—for the last few months."

Meloon shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, well, if you don't want to tell, all right. I've no business to pry into your affairs. It hasn't been my habit to board my hired men."

"But I haven't any home about here."

"Very well. You can have a room and grub in my house. I won't promise to give you a cent the first month, but if you're worth it, I will. Come on now and help me fix up a fence the cattle broke through yesterday."

The two men walked away. Lotos gazed after them, then trotted back to the house. Billy looked again from the window, saw the men swinging over the field, wondered idly who was Meloon's companion. By this time she knew the neighbors; she knew their friendly, informal fashion of driving a dozen miles from their homes, taking dinner, and then driving back. People a score of miles away were neighbors.

There was something soothing to her in this return to country primitiveness. Already she felt the healing touch. If she could stay here ten years, and work hard all the time, then—at this point in her thoughts Billy always was conscious of a terror and resentment which were obscure, but strong.

An hour later, still with her sweeping-cap on, its frill flapping about her face, she hurried through the long shed that led to the wood-house. She had a basket in her hand, for she wanted pine kindlings. She heard the sound of chopping; it was Meloon's custom, at odd moments, to split blocks of pine into small pieces for the sake of the quick fire they would make.

There was a smile on her face as she emerged from the long shed; she was wondering what remark Meloon would make to her; sometimes he said things with an unexpected, sharp flavor to them; she relished this flavor; she would have said that it toned her up. She had already come to depend on his kindness and consideration. She used to like to sit at the other side of the hearth evenings when there was a fire there, and watch the rugged, strong face—a martial face she called it.

Yes, some one was swinging the axe, but at the instant she approached, the man was stooping to gather up some of the wood he had split.

She was within a couple of yards of the chopping-log when she stood still. She trembled slightly.

Hildreth lifted himself upright. He took off his hat. His face grew red and then white.

"You here?" she said. Her eyes wandered over his denim suit; they did not immediately return to his face.

"Yes," he answered. "Why not?"

She did not reply to this. She began to pick up wood and place it in her basket. She knew that Hildreth was watching her.

In a moment he came to her side and helped her. He piled the wood high; then he lifted the basket, saying:

"I will carry it for you."

"No," she answered; "it's not heavy; I'm used to taking it myself."

She took it and walked towards the shed. She walked unsteadily. He stood still, his eyes upon her.

Suddenly she set her basket on the floor and turned towards him. With an impatient movement she pushed back the drooping frill of the sweeping-cap. But with that movement her impatience seemed to end, for there was none of that feeling in her tone as she asked:

"Why did you come here?"

Having put this question, she knew instantly that she ought not to have asked it.

The answer was prompt.

"I came because you are here." Silence; then he added: "I seem to live because you are living."

Another silence, which was broken by Hildreth's saying, with some recklessness:

"I can't help it if you are angry with me. I had to find you—then I had to come here."

"You are very foolish."

"No one knows that so well as I know it."

Though her eyes were lowered, Billy was aware of the light in the young man's face. She was aware also of the quick change in the aspect of everything caused by Hildreth's presence. There had been calm and a growing peace; there were days when she forgot for an hour that the ambition of her life had been uprooted as if it were a weed pulled from the ground and flung out to die in the sun. Since she might never sing, she was thankful for even a moment's forgetfulness of the longing to sing.

Now something seemed to burst in her heart and let loose that overwhelming torrent again. With this consciousness she grew more and more indignant. It was too cruel that her ineffective past should come to life again just to torture her.

"Yes," said Hildreth; "no one knows so well as I know how foolish I am, but I'm not quite such an idiot as to come here thinking to try to make you love me—that takes a load from your mind, doesn't it?"

No reply.

"I know it does. I don't mean by that that I don't love you as much—more—than I ever did. I expect I'm going to do that as long as I live. But I give up hoping."

"Why did you come, then?"

Billy raised her eyes; again she pushed back the cap-frill.

Hildreth laughed.

"You've no idea how odd and attractive you look in that cap. It's as if you were taking some kind of a part and had dressed for it in that quaint thing."

"You think of the stage so much."

"Yes; you used to think of the stage."

"But I've given that up. I am getting used to forgetting it."

Billy felt more free. She believed Hildreth's words.

"I heard you had lost your voice." Hildreth spoke solemnly. "That is why I came."

She turned upon him in utmost surprise.

"Why you came?"

"Yes. Give me a chance to tell you about it. You see I can't speak now."

Footsteps were coming from the yard. Meloon entered. He glanced in surprise at the two. To her great annoyance, Billy found herself blushing deeply.

Hildreth hastened to say: "I've found an old acquaintance. I had the honor to know Miss Armstrong a few years ago."

"Oh, you did?"

Meloon took up the axe which Hildreth had dropped. He seemed to examine the edge with great care; he pressed his thumb on it. For some reason Billy could not walk off with her basket; she remained standing, her face turned towards the master of the house. Suddenly he lifted his head.

"That accounts," he remarked. "Now I know why you came here to be a farmer"—a slight laugh, with a movement of one hand towards Billy. "Perhaps you knew he was coming?" to her.

But before she could reply Hildreth exclaimed:

"No; she knew nothing about me—nothing about my intentions."

Meloon put down the axe. He looked at Billy.

"Possibly you don't want him to stay? In that case he shall tramp."

Hildreth looked imploringly at the girl. Though she stood quiet, with downcast eyes, she felt the intense pleading of that look, felt it with a mingling of softness and resentment.

She raised her eyes towards Meloon as she answered, coldly:

"Indeed, Mr. Meloon, you need not consider me in the matter."

And now she was able to take her basket of wood and go away with it.

The two men stood a moment without speaking. They were gazing at each other, the younger man on the defensive plainly, with an angry flush rising to his forehead.

"Well?" at last from Meloon.

Hildreth made an uneasy movement. Finally he exclaimed:

"I don't know that I'm answerable to you for my actions."

"Not in the least."

Meloon gently stroked his mustache.

Hildreth kicked at the wood, sending a piece flying across the floor. Then he drew himself up quickly, folding his arms across his chest. Remembering that that was rather a favorite attitude on the stage, he unfolded them and succeeded in making them hang motionless at his sides.

X

"DO YOU WANT TO SING AGAIN?"

"I MIGHT as well tell you the truth," he began.

"Of course, if you tell me anything."

"Don't talk like that!" in an irrepressible burst of excitement. Then Hildreth tried to calm himself again. It was really quite maddening to be put in the wrong in this way by that imperturbable man standing there leaning on a stick he had brought in.

"It's plain enough," began Hildreth, "that I asked you for work because I wanted to be near Miss Armstrong. You'll think that's because I love her. I do love her; and she doesn't care the least in the world for me."

As he spoke these words, in a low, hard voice, Hildreth gazed straight into Meloon's eyes.

"However," went on Hildreth, glancing away, "though all that is true, and I came here because Miss Armstrong is here, I didn't come because I love her."

Meloon's eyebrows went up the fraction of an inch. The younger man resolutely suppressed an inclination to try to knock that fellow down.

"No; I came for something else. The moment I heard that she had lost her voice, that moment I resolved that she should regain it. I can teach her; I know a method. I knew it would be useless to write to her; she would reply that she had given up all that. But she hasn't; she can't. Once having had such a voice as hers was—but you don't care for such things. I won't talk of them."

"So you came to aid her to restore her voice?"

"Just that."

Meloon took up the axe again and contemplated its edge for what seemed a long time. At last:

"It appears to me," he said, "that Miss Armstrong herself is the person to decide whether she wants her voice back, even if you can teach her how to restore it. She's getting along very well here now. She does lots of work, and thrives on it. Don't cry out at that. Why isn't it just as fine a thing to make butter and cheese as 'tis to sing at Manrico in the tower? Tell me that."

Meloon smiled as if he were smiling to himself. In an absent manner he chopped the stick that he had brought in.

"Good heavens!" gasped Hildreth. "Art! The exhilaration, the subtle satisfaction of being an artist! Do you know anything about that?"

Meloon threw the last fragment of wood from him.

"Come into the house with me—no, wait here, and I'll tell you," he answered.

He hurried away, but returned immediately, with a green baize bag in one hand, a fiddle-bow in the other. He sat down on the top of the chopping-block, carefully tuned the instrument, and then played that song of Leonora's which he had just mentioned.

When he had finished he said, "I didn't do that because I do it so well, but just to let you know that I care. I know what I'm talking about. The way a man draws a fiddle-bow across the strings tells you whether he cares for music or not—really cares, I mean."

"And yet you talk about making butter!" cried Hildreth. His expressive face had clouded over as he listened.

"Oh yes. Butter's a good thing. I've lived longer than you have, and I know that life is something more than art. You artists haven't found the secret yet."

"Have you?" harshly.

"I? Oh no; but I've gone further than you have."

The cloud deepened upon Hildreth's face.

"Has Miss Armstrong heard you play?"

"No."

In spite of himself the cloud lifted a little.

Before either man could speak again, hurried footsteps came along the shed, and Billy appeared, breathless, her eyes shining. She stopped abruptly, gazing at Mr. Meloon. The violin still rested against his shoulder; he had withdrawn it, and replaced it as if it were something he loved to have near him.

"I knew it was not Mr. Hildreth's touch," she cried, "but you—" she paused.

"Why, did you think I had fiddles about, then?" asked Meloon. "You nearly fell over this when you came."

She did not reply; she was looking at Meloon as if she had never seen him before.

"Oh," rousing herself, "I suppose I thought you used to play. Why haven't you played since I have been here?"

"I thought it might annoy you."

"I've been starving for it." She walked away, but returned. "I don't mean that. I've done very well without it. I intend to do without it all my life. I grow stout and strong; I'm earning money, mother is happy, and I am happy. You may play the violin all the time, Mr. Meloon; I shall not care; I shall not even notice it. You see," with apology, "I was surprised. Now I'm going. Mother has been paring the curd from the cheese we set; you two may have some. I remember Mr. Hildreth liked it that summer he was camping. That fawn Jersey heifer gives the richest milk of any of the cows, Mr. Meloon."

She walked away once more, and this time she did not come back.

Meloon looked at Hildreth.

"Some men would turn you out. I'll try you; but just mind this, if she is troubled, off you go."

Hildreth came nearer. His eyes felt hot and his throat dry.

"I'm grateful. I didn't think you'd let me stay," he said.

"It isn't for your sake," was the answer; "it's for hers. I won't put a straw in the way of her singing. People have to find out things for themselves."

In the house Billy had gone to the cheese-room.

"Mother," she said, "Vane Hildreth is here."

Mrs. Armstrong sat down quickly.

"Then the Lord hasn't heard me."

The knife she held in her hand fell with a clatter to the floor. She leaned both hands heavily on the table in front of her. There was an odor of milk and fresh curd in the room. Billy inhaled that odor with an unreasonable feeling of thankfulness.

"Oh!" said Mrs. Armstrong, "I did think we might be safe here. And he has found us out!"

She spoke as if referring to the Apollyon of *The*

Pilgrim's Progress; and, indeed, she was thinking of him.

"Mr. Meloon has other hired men," remarked Billy.

"Others!" with some savageness. "But they're nothing to us."

"He needn't be anything to us."

"Wilhelminy, you talk like a fool! This is worse than Paris; and I didn't know as anything could be worse. Where shall we go now?"

She looked about the room as though possibly she might escape through a window, and take her child with her.

Billy stood for an instant with a helpless air. Then she walked forward and carefully turned a cheese; she passed her hand over its smooth surface to find if it needed oiling. This simple action calmed her so that she answered steadily:

"Why should we go anywhere?"

"But that man—that opera-singer? I always was afraid, if you ever saw him again, you'd have a notion that you were in love with him. You set so much by that dog of his."

"I certainly do love Lotos," said the girl.

She went to the open door and whistled. Immediately there was heard the slight scratching of a dog's feet on a bare floor. Lotos walked in and stood by his mistress. She knelt and put her arms about his neck.

"Oh yes," she said; "I certainly love my dog."

There was a tremor in her voice. Mrs. Armstrong wrung her hands.

"Where shall we go?" she asked again. "I b'lieve I'd ruther be in Paris."

Billy rose.

"We won't go anywhere," she said. "We'll stay here. I'm earning two dollars and a half a week, and I don't think I could earn a cent anywhere else. I never was brought up to earn anything. I want to pay Miss Runciman. I can do housework. I'm going to see if my cheese will take a prize at the next agricultural fair. We will stay here."

"But that man?"

"We will stay."

Mrs. Armstrong went to her daughter's side and took her hand, holding it closely. She reached up and kissed her cheek.

"You know I 'ain't got anything but you, Miny," she said; "of course we'll stay if you want to."

Billy returned the kiss.

"Poor little mother!" she whispered.

Then she hurried from the room, followed by the dog. She hurried until she reached her own chamber. Having reached it, she locked the door, sat down in a chair, and covered her face with her hands, crying and sobbing as children do. The dog whined and groaned with her, leaping at her to lick her face.

But when Billy appeared later she was so phlegmatically calm that the two men who ate the biscuit and pudding she made for dinner gazed at her curiously. Meloon made a good meal, as usual. He tried to persuade his new hired man to eat, and the new hired man conscientiously seconded his efforts. But Hildreth felt as if the food would choke him. He did not take the least notice of Billy, and was barely civil to her mother. When they had all risen from the table and Meloon had left the room, Hildreth turned to Mrs. Armstrong. He was quite pale and had that appearance of desperation which characterizes nervous people when laboring under excitement.

"I wanted to say to you," he began, "that you needn't be unhappy because I have come. It seems to me that I must stay, but if my staying makes you too wretched, I must go. Are you going to be kind to me?"

The young man's voice was very sweet. He had gone to Mrs. Armstrong's side and was standing close to her. Billy watched them. She resented this marring of her peaceful days, but in her resentment was mingled something which she did not understand. She wondered what her mother would say; whatever she said, she, Billy, must have her own way, since, plainly, her way was right.

Mrs. Armstrong was silent. Hildreth repeated his words:

"Are you going to be kind to me?"

Mrs. Armstrong looked at him earnestly, and then exclaimed, naïvely:

"Why, how could I help it?"

Hildreth's eyes suddenly filled. He leaned forward and put his hand on the woman's shoulder.

"Forgive me!" he murmured.

He kissed her cheek as if he had been her son.

Then he left the room.

Billy said nothing. She began to gather the plates from the table and carry them to the sink. Her mother remained standing, her faded, dreamy eyes fixed on the window. At last she roused herself.

"He seems to have such a good heart," she said.

Billy made no response.

After that the days went on apparently exactly as they had done before Hildreth came. The two women saw him only at meals. In the evenings, when the others sat by the open hearth, even if there were no fire there, Hildreth was not with them.

Sometimes Mrs. Armstrong would say: "Where is that young man? I should think he'd be lonesome"; and Meloon would answer: "I told him he'd better come in here."

Then he would furtively glance at Billy, who, if she saw the glance, would return it openly.

Two weeks seemed a long time. To the girl's secret surprise and amusement her mother appeared to have lost that feeling of suspicion and fear in regard to Hildreth. She was sorry for him; she was afraid he was lonesome; did Miny know if he had a môther living?

It was in the third week after Hildreth's arrival. Billy had been a mile up the hill to a neighbor's with a small pail to get a cup of hop yeast. She and Lotos were on their sedate homeward way when, from a cart-path in the woods at her right, there emerged two mild-faced oxen. They were drawing an empty cart, and Hildreth was walking beside them.

Sometimes we have a dim sense that a moment of importance is approaching, and we hesitate, not knowing why.

Billy paused now. She had an impulse to turn back, but to do so would be almost insulting.

Hildreth hurried forward.

"I knew the time would come if I could wait," he said, quickly. "I wouldn't ask to see you. You needn't look in that way. Do you wish that you could sing again?"

Billy was so startled by this question that at first she only repeated the words, "sing again?"

"Get back your voice, I mean. Tell me."

Hildreth had his long whip in his hand and he was twisting it round and round.

She roused herself.

"I've given it up," she answered; "we won't talk of that."

"Yes, we will talk of it. I have come hundreds of miles to talk of it; and then I thought I never should find you. Oh, certainly, we will talk of it."

He spoke with a feverish eagerness. He called to the oxen that rough "whoa!" which he had learned to speak as if he had spoken it all his life. The animals stood still in their tracks, drooping, calm.

He took a step nearer the girl.

"You long to sing?"

He looked at her with a more strenuous question in his eyes than in his words.

"I've given that up."

"But it hurt you to give it up?"

"It killed me."

"Ah! Then you want to live again."

"No—no. I can't. They tried—I tried, but it was of no use."

"They were wrong."

"No, they were right."

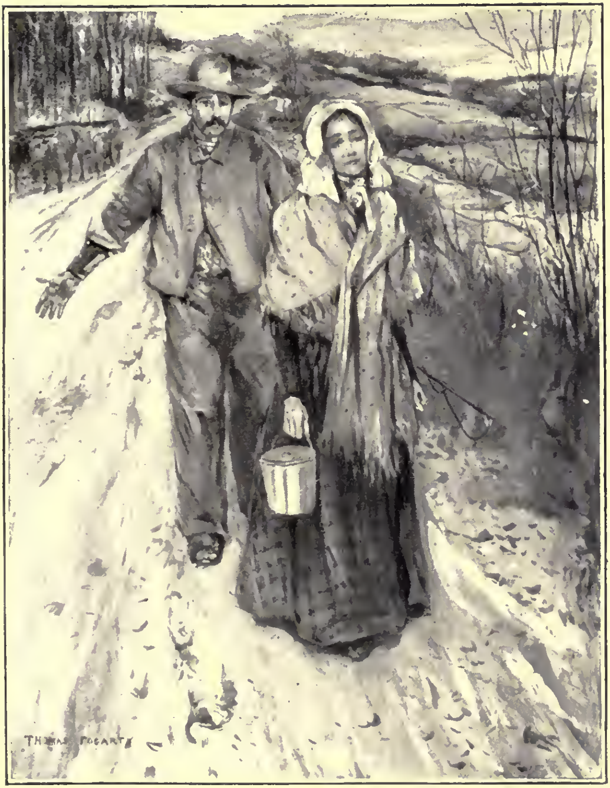
The two were silent now, gazing at each other.

The place was solitary; they heard the chick-a-dees in the woods, and Billy thought to herself, "It is going to be colder." And she asked herself why she did not hurry home. It was already time to mix the dough and set it to rising.

"Yes, they were right," she reiterated, firmly; and now she began to walk away, carrying her pail of yeast very carefully.

Hildreth followed her.

"You're bound to hear me now," he began. "I'm telling you the truth. I came here to help you. We'll begin to-morrow—to-day. You shall sing as


THOMAS FOGARTY

“‘YOU ARE BOUND TO HEAR ME’”

you never sang before. It's the Boldrea method—Leonora Runciman knows of it. I went to her as soon as I heard you had lost your voice. She is sure it can be restored. She told me that the world must not lose it—that you need not despair. It's well that you've been living in the country—you're well and strong. You're in just the condition to begin. 'Tis as if Providence had arranged it all—your health so firm now—yes"—eagerly—"it is Providence that has laid the foundation. Miss Armstrong, you won't fight against God, who has sent me to you? Do you think your voice was given you to throw away?"

Billy was standing stiff and straight. Suddenly she leaned forward and placed the pail carefully on the ground. Having done this, she stood erect and clasped her hands closely under her shawl.

"Yes," she said, bitterly, "perhaps it was given to me; and it was taken away—taken away as if God hated me and wished to humiliate me. Do you know how it went?—like that!" flinging out one hand, "and the people looked on and waited for me to sing, and I couldn't. You might better go, Mr. Hildreth. Do you think I'll suffer the hope, and the pain, and the confidence, and the despair again? It's just hell and paradise."

She turned from him and looked off over the country, hill and valley, with bared trees and brown grass, lying still in a thin haze of smoke.

XI

BY THE FIRESIDE

"NO," said Hildreth, resolutely, "I shall not go; I shall stay here and teach you to sing. I'm sure there is no organic trouble with your throat. I will give you a year. You may keep on with your work, since it makes you strong."

Billy faced round upon him.

"No," she said, "no, I will not try."

"You will not?"

"Never!"

"You choose butter-making—you choose cooking pies and doughnuts for that man."

Having said this last phrase, Hildreth wished that he might recall it.

"If you like to put it so—yes."

Billy stooped and picked up the yeast-pail with a steady hand. She started on her homeward walk, and Lotos, who had been much bored by this conversation, followed her with relief in his aspect.

Hildreth gazed after her, then ran to her side.

"I shall not take your never for an answer," he said, now speaking with grave calmness. "Other thoughts will come to you. I want to tell you what Miss Runciman said—her hope—her conviction—"

The girl had paused in her walk to listen.

"You need tell me nothing. I forbid you to speak on this subject again. Miss Runciman is nothing to me but the woman who gave me money that I'm going to repay."

Having spoken thus, Billy went on, and Hildreth turned back to where the oxen stood waiting for him. He leaned against one of the animals. The young man suddenly began to tremble; the sturdy ox stood quiet, and Hildreth envied him.

At last he stepped forward and cracked his whip; the oxen vibrated slowly in response, then bent to their deliberate walk. Far down below him, the only human being visible, hurrying along under the leafless trees, Hildreth saw Billy, and Lotos was by her side.

"I wonder why she cares for the dog," thought Hildreth. But he knew that she might well care for Lotos for his own sake.

"I might as well go to-day," the young man went on thinking. "Yes; I will go to-day. I will tell Meloon that I'm sick of the work—it's too hard."

He trudged on, in and out of the ruts, sometimes steadying himself with a hand on the ox, his eyes watching the girl until she had disappeared behind a hill.

Hildreth wondered where his old light-hearted self could be—that self that had laughed and talked and sung, on that driving trip with his aunt Leonora Runciman, and his sister Bathsheba—that was the time when he had first met Wilhelmina. He could see her, as he had seen her first, coming down the river path towards their encampment by the falls. What a voice she had then! He liked to think that he had fallen in love with her at first sight, though it was not true that he had done so. And if she were ugly and uninteresting, he should just the same have that desire to help restore her voice—just the same. Which also was not true.

Well, everything was all over now. He would tell Meloon to-night that he should like to go immediately—to-morrow, if convenient for Meloon. Perhaps he ought to stay and finish husking that corn and put it in the corn-barn; but no, the sooner he went the better. He had a wish to leave the oxen standing there in the road, while he struck across the fields towards the nearest station. Of course he couldn't do that. He kept on walking with them. He put them up in their stalls; then he sat down on the big barn floor where the corn was piled, and began husking again. His hands were not yet so hardened but that the rough blades and stalks sometimes drew blood; but he did not know it. The wind of fall blew through the place and whisked the husks about. A fawn-colored heifer from the yard wandered in and began nosing about for some sweet morsel. Hildreth flung an ear of corn at her; she looked at him in amazed inquiry, and then strolled out again. Her hair was already beginning to be thick and rough for the winter.

The early-coming darkness sent him to the house for a lantern. He dreaded to go in. He wished he might meet Meloon; the sooner he told him he was going, the better. It was odd that he hadn't met him, for Meloon was always out-of-doors and at work.

Hildreth went down the lane to drive up the cows that still lingered in the lower mowing; they had the freedom of that mowing at this time of year.

With the sun's going down the wind had dropped; there was a sweet smell in the air, that curious odor like the odor of spring that sometimes comes in the autumn when autumn is near to winter.

And there was Meloon striding down from the upland. His figure was dimly visible; and soon Hildreth saw that there was a gun over his shoulder; and there was something in the game-bag he carried. Meloon jumped over the fence at the head of the lane; he was whistling spiritedly a bar of "Bonnie Dundee." In this dusk Hildreth saw that he looked a stalwart young man, and he resented that fact.

"Now I'll tell him I can't stay," thought Hildreth, and he hurried forward.

"Rabbits," said Meloon, tersely; "rabbit stew to-morrow, with dumplings."

So that was what the man was thinking? Hildreth's lip curled.

"Do you like rabbit stew?" asked Meloon.

"I don't know—never ate any."

"There's time enough. We'll both go at that corn in the morning."

The cows had started down the lane. Hildreth fell into step with his companion. "Now I'll tell him," he thought again.

He opened his lips; a soft breeze of that strangely sweet air came across his face. "I'll wait a minute," he thought.

"I tell you, it's fine up there on the mountain," said Meloon; "an hour of it is worth a week in your towns. I suppose you're a town lover, eh?"

"No—yes; I'm sure I don't know. I hope my hands will stop bleeding before that corn is husked."

The last sentence came weakly from the speaker. He had now resolved definitely that he should be too hasty if he gave notice to-night of his departure. Having come to this decision, Hildreth's spirits rose almost to hilarity. It was as if he had been saved from something evil. At the supper-table that night he talked a little, and after supper, for the first time, he came to the big fireplace in the sitting-room, where the fire blazed all day and evening.

Mrs. Armstrong looked at him approvingly. She could not find it in her heart to be unkind to him since he had kissed her, and she had seen the tears in his eyes. He seemed a different man to her now; for that is the way some women reason—or rather, don't reason.

Meloon sat with his long legs stretched out towards the fire; his hands were in his pockets, his head thrown back against his chair.

Hildreth felt impelled to look at him, and at the same time he wished to hide this impulse. Billy and her mother were sitting at the other side of the fireplace by a little table on which was a lamp. The two women were mending; the elder had a stocking of Meloon's drawn over her hand, and the long needleful of blue yarn was pulled in and out with regular movements. Hildreth's eyes wandered to the girl, who sat at the farther side of the table; Lotos was at her feet, having carefully placed himself on a fold of her gown, where he was not only sleeping but snoring.

Was there ever a group that seemed more peaceful?

The second glance Hildreth gave to Billy showed him that she had his denim jumper in her lap, and that she was sewing on buttons in place of those he had torn off. He was now wearing the mate to that jumper. He had provided himself with two denim suits when he had started to let himself to be a farmer, much as he would have secured masquerading dresses for the stage. Thus far, in spite of the hard work he had done, the young man still continued to have something of the feeling that he was acting on a stage, different indeed from that to which he had been accustomed, but still not real life.

Now, as he saw Billy mending his clothes, he averted his eyes quickly. He could not bear that. He knew that there was no tenderness in her thoughts as she thus worked, but the homely tenderness of the action made Hildreth's heart beat heavily. He moved restlessly. Then he rose and walked to the back of Billy's chair. He stood there in silence an instant before he said, abruptly:

"Miss Armstrong, you needn't do that for me."

Billy raised her head, then lowered it again immediately.

"Why not?"—calmly. "When I looked over the clothes, I found this needed buttons."

Her tone was so matter-of-fact that Hildreth shut his teeth tightly. Why should not her tone be matter-of-fact? He went back to his chair.

"I dislike to add to your work, Miss Armstrong," he said, coldly.

Meloon sat watching them both. He had withdrawn one hand from his pocket and was slowly stroking his mustache, his eyes shining with an expression of interest or amusement.

"Who says that country life isn't interesting?" he suddenly asked.

Hildreth turned angrily towards him, but when he met the genuine good-will in his host's face his anger died.

Meloon drew himself up into an attitude of more alertness.

"Hildreth," he said, abruptly, "I suppose you sing?"

Billy's needle, drawn out to the full length of the thread, paused for an instant in the air; but only for an instant, when it was steadily put through the button and pulled out again.

"Yes," said Hildreth.

"Tenor, of course?"

"Why of course?" with some irritation.

"Oh, I don't know"—easily; "I should guess that from your looks. I wish you'd try your voice on us. Will you?"

Hildreth hesitated. He longed to sing before Billy, but he was afraid of her indignation.

"Cold?—sore throat?" laughed Meloon.

"No. If you wish it, I am willing to sing," decisively.

"All right! I do wish it."

Billy snipped off her thread with a steady hand. Then she stuck her needle in the cushion on the table; having done this, she rose in a leisurely manner, remarked that she had forgotten to put the beans to soak, and walked out of the room. The dining-room was between the kitchen and the sitting-room, so that when she reached the kitchen there were walls, and there was some space between her and the singer.

She stood still in the darkness for a moment. Lotos had crowded out with her, and now was in a very depressed attitude close to her. Billy was listening with a wretched feeling of dread and longing.

Presently she heard the voice which had sung to her from the tower. Though muffled by the intervening room, it was still clear, and she knew instantly how it had grown in power and sweetness since she had last heard it. He had chosen that same solo of Manrico's—and that was like him, she thought, vindictively. Even here she could know that he was singing it better than he had sung it then, not more dramatically or with more heart, but with far more technical skill.

As the song went on, Billy's fear that she should try to sing the response grew greater and more uncontrollable. She would fail if she tried; therefore she must not try. To open her lips and have that husky gasp come forth in place of pure tone—she could not endure that again. She must run away. She distrusted herself. Hildreth's voice—no, Manrico's voice—went on stronger and more sweetly emotional. The lights of the theatre seemed to flash before the girl. She breathed heavily. This was a hint of her life, and her life had been taken from her. It is a cruel thing to have your life taken from you, and still to go through the farce of living.

Billy roused herself. She groped hurriedly for a shawl that she had flung in a chair. She huddled it about her and found the outer door, breaking into a run as she escaped from the house. The stars were so brilliant that she need not stumble; the air, now that the sun was down, was keen and full of frost. Lotos ran close behind her.

It was good to be out under the sky. Billy thought she would be able to run miles in this invigorating air—miles to escape from the sound of that passionate voice. Just now flight was the only thing left to her. She would be obliged to go back, but not yet.

In a few moments she became calmer; she began to think that it was a kind of hot-house excitement from which she was escaping. She could not now hear Hildreth singing. She did not wish to hear him sing. What she wished to do was to stay here in the country and make butter, cook doughnuts, and wash dishes.

She wondered what the Boldrea method was. She wondered if there were any method—but no, her singing power was gone. She shouted the word "gone" out into the darkness. Then she drew herself up strongly. A person could not do a more foolish thing than to waste nervous force by becoming excited. She was a silly, disappointed girl, but she would behave respectably.

She folded her shawl methodically about her and walked sedately, but still farther from the house. Her ebullition was over. She was already ashamed of it, and glad that there had been no witnesses save Lotos, and Lotos did not count.

XII

HOPE REVIVING

YES, it was certainly a good thing to be in the country.

"Wilhelminy! Miny!" shrilly from towards the house.

Billy shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"Mother is so foolish!" she exclaimed.

From the deep shadow of the buildings a form detached itself and hastened forward.

"She is coming after me," still more impatiently.

She hurried on, but the figure came faster still. It was not Mrs. Armstrong, though it was she who had "cried upon" her daughter.

A hand touched Billy's shoulder, and Meloon said, in a casual manner, as if he had accidentally met the girl:

"There's going to be a white frost. Sha'n't we cover those petunias under the south window? If we do, we'll save them another week, I think."

"Yes," with some eagerness. "I was thinking of the petunias before supper; then I forgot them."

The two turned back. Meloon took Billy's hand and drew it within his arm, but absently, as if he hardly knew that he did so.

To her surprise, the girl was glad of the support; she was all at once conscious of a weakness and unsteadiness.

Meloon began speaking of a colt he was training. He said he believed that Billy could ride the colt by spring. It was rather good fun to ride a fine horse—didn't she think so? But he did not wait for her reply.

When, fifteen minutes later, they reached the house, Billy, cool and calm, said "Thank you," earnestly, and then ran up to her own chamber.

When every one had left the sitting-room, save the master of the house and the two dogs, he went out again. He fastened the cloth still more securely over the petunias. Then he walked about for a while. Once he looked up at the sky and said, aloud:

"Yes, the air is full of frost."

He bore himself with his usual erect, martial bearing. When he had reached the door on his return, he paused and extended his hand as if to feel a drop of rain. Then he stroked his mustache, smiling beneath it.

"It is certainly frosty," he said again. He rumpled his thick, grizzled hair, and added, with a slight laugh:

"Yes; and I've reached a frosty age. I ought to look in the glass more; I forget what a graybeard I am. But it's no matter. I'm at a good time of life. I'm old enough to detect an illusion, and not too old to enjoy the very illusion I have detected. Who says that isn't a good age? Things are too hard on that girl—too cursed hard. And she's got pluck. Wonder if her voice really is gone?"

Meloon sat down before the embers of the fire and gazed into it. After a while his eyes closed, opened abruptly, then closed again.

After that everything at the farm-house went on apparently just the same as if Hildreth had not sung. Every morning the young man had thoughts of telling his employer that he couldn't stay; but night found him sitting with the rest before the fire. He rarely talked. He had formed the habit of taking a book and gazing at the pages, sometimes turning them, sometimes looking over it at Billy, who was always busy. When she was not more actively engaged she sewed or knit, and was absorbed in her work.

The fall deepened. The petunias could no longer be saved by covering. Almost all the greenery was blackened and drooping. Mrs. Armstrong and her daughter were chopping meat and apples for Thanksgiving mince-pies; they were making loaves of rich fruit-cake. On some bleak afternoons, when the work failed, Billy took hurried walks with Lotos over the desolate fields, where the wind blew sharp from the mountains.

At such times Hildreth would watch her as she went, and then turn doggedly to his task. He felt as if he had been on this farm a hundred years. He had refused brilliant offers for the opera season. What did he care for brilliant offers now? He grew thin and gaunt, but he was well.

One day he resolved to change his conduct. Why shouldn't he try to see that girl? Why should he seek to act like a block of wood? And why couldn't he throw off this feeling that bound him?

Then again his spirits rose absurdly. A few days later he was sawing wood in front of the shed. Lotos came bounding towards him, gave him a hasty greeting, then hurried away.

Hildreth scrupulously continued sawing the log, and as the block dropped to the ground he straightened himself and looked up the lane. There was the dog galloping forward, and presently Billy came in sight, walking rapidly. She wore a heavy, brown shawl; but even thus encumbered, the grace of her carriage was unmistakable.

Hildreth bent to his labor again and finished the huge stick. He took up the bit of tallow from the board where he had placed it, and carefully rubbed it along the blade of the saw, his hand trembling as he did so. Then he hung up the tool on the wall of the wood-house and walked down the lane. He made for a grove of beech-trees that grew in that upland pasture. Billy went there for nuts; she had carried a basket with her. He came upon her just as he had planned. She glanced at him with the arched brows of surprise.

"I'll take the basket for you," he said.

He poked among the fallen leaves and picked up the sharp-cornered little nuts for a few moments; then he said, suddenly:

"I'm not going to bear this another day."

"You don't like your work, then?" with a gentle interest.

"Oh, I can stand my work. But I'm going; I'm going to-morrow."

He had not had the slightest intention of saying this when he had started to follow; he had felt only a blind resolution to speak freely once more to this girl, to cast off the fetters he had imposed upon himself. After all, what was the use of fetters, save to gall one?

"We shall miss you."

"No doubt," with great sarcasm.

Silence; the nuts fell with a soft rustle into the basket. Three crows went cawing over the beech-grove.

It seemed impossible for Hildreth to speak an ordinary commonplace now; so he said nothing. Very soon, from their combined industry, the basket became full of nuts. Two chipmonks watched these thieves with scolding from the tree-boughs.

"Now I must go home," at last from Billy; "I'm to make biscuit for supper, raised biscuit, and they are to rise a second time. You like yeast biscuit, sir, I've noticed."

"Do I?" sullenly.

They walked on until they came to the first pair of bars. Billy hastened forward and leaned her arms on the top bar so that it could not be lowered. Hildreth joined her. The valley was before them with the sombre beauty of November upon it.

"It's lovely," said Billy.

"Yes; but I've had enough of it."

"Have you?"

In another moment the girl turned towards her companion, but though she turned towards him, her face was averted.

"I hope you won't go," she said.

Hildreth's face flushed, but he maintained his attitude, with his eyes towards the valley, as he asked:

"Why?"

"Because I want you to stay."

"Why do you want me to stay?"

"Don't you know? Can't you guess?"

Hildreth turned quickly enough now.

"Oh, Billy," in a half whisper; "can it be that you think you could love me?"

Billy shrank a little. Hildreth saw that she blushed.

"I wasn't thinking of that," she answered.

"Not of that? I think of it night and day."

"I don't think of love," more steadily. "Why should I?"

"Indeed, there is no reason," bitterly.

Billy's eyes came to her companion's face; there was something imploring in them.

"I tell you it is foolish to think of love. There's a great deal besides love in the world," she said.

"If you loved you wouldn't think so."

"Vane," sharply, "do you know that if I can't sing again I shall die?"

The young man started. Then he answered, quietly:

"You don't look like dying."

"Oh, I may not seem dead, but I shall be dead all the same."

"I offered to help you."

"Yes—yes, and I refused. Well, ever since then, waking or sleeping, I've been crying out to myself, 'I must try—I must try.' But if I should fail again—"

Billy looked off down the valley.

"You won't fail."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

Billy came a step nearer her companion and put her hand on his arm.

"Vane," she said, "if I can't get back my voice, I can never bear the agony. It would be better to go on just as I am. Sometimes I feel sure I can sing, but I dare not open my lips. To have felt what it is to sing, and then—but I mustn't recall that."

She was speaking hurriedly, breathlessly; there was a pale circle about her mouth, but her mouth was very red. Her hand pressed more heavily on his arm.

"I wanted to go on as I am. Here is safety—why can't I be at peace? Why can't I feel at peace, as if I had never sung? Sometimes I hate Miss Runciman. Why didn't she let me alone? Just look down this valley—'sweet vale of Avoca,'" with a little laugh. "I am like a small tempest in the midst of this quiet. Vane, tell me you won't go."

"I won't go," he answered, promptly.

"And you'll make me sing?" Like a child she persisted.

"Yes, yes; I swear it," eagerly.

She withdrew from him. A cloud came over her face.

"You mustn't speak like that," she said. "When you speak like that I fear that you don't know what you're saying."

"You're hard to please," he responded. "But I do know what I'm promising. Listen to what I tell you. To-day is the 24th of November. On the 24th of November next you shall be ready to sing in opera—you shall be a *prima donna* again. Oh, I am speaking truth. We will be singing together. Your voice shall be better than ever. Billy, you must believe me."

She had turned again towards him and her eyes were fixed on his face. Her whole body seemed to be listening to his words.

"If that were only the truth!" she exclaimed, after a silence.

"It is the truth."

They went down the pasture. Neither spoke again. The girl walked as if she were hardly in this world. Sometimes she stumbled over a root or a stone and Hildreth caught her hand. She instantly withdrew the hand, but did not appear to know that he was with her.

Near the corn barn they came upon Meloon, who was shelling corn against a long, flat piece of iron fixed in a large basket. He glanced at Billy, glanced again, and then suddenly rose from the stool on which he was seated. He looked at Hildreth, and some indefinable change came over his face. He stood up straight and flung back his shoulders.

"Well," he said, and his tone was so firm as to be almost challenging, "are you two coming to tell me that you are going to marry each other?"

Billy laughed.

"Marry!" She laughed again. She folded her tremulous hands under her shawl. She could not stand there a moment.

"I must hurry," she said; "the biscuit will be spoiled."

She turned away.

"Wait," returned Meloon, "until I can tell you that some one has come for you. There she is now."

A door had been thrown open, and there stepped from the threshold a tall woman who was so wrapped in furs that her pale face appeared to be framed in fur. She had a cane in one hand, and she moved slowly.

XIII

FAILURE

BILLY watched that figure an instant before she stirred. Her face was alive with the keenest interest and pain. After this brief hesitation she hurried forward, and Hildreth kept pace with her. Behind the stranger there appeared Mrs. Armstrong's shrinking figure and alarmed countenance.

"Oh, Miss Runciman!" cried Billy, at last.

"Ah, there you are," was the response, in a musical, authoritative tone.

The new-comer paused, leaning on her stick and gazing at the two. Vane advanced and kissed his aunt's cheek.

"What have you two been doing?" she asked, with still more authority. "You're not at any silly love-making, I trust."

Hildreth frowned, but the girl laughed just as she had laughed a moment before at Meloon's remark.

"Why do people always think of love-making?" she said.

"Because," was the immediate answer, "there is usually reason for thinking thus; and you, Billy Armstrong, are just the girl to make people think of love-making."

These last words were spoken with some severity. Miss Runciman added, quickly: "But I suppose it makes no difference. Come into the house; the wind is like ice."

She shivered, drew her furs more closely, and turned slowly towards the door, leaning on her stick. Hildreth drew her arm within his.

"I thought you were at Tampa, Aunt Leonora," he said.

"I ought to be at Tampa," was the reply. "I delayed that I might see Miss Armstrong. At the very last moment it was borne in upon me that I might save her."

Mrs. Armstrong, hovering, was listening distressfully; her daughter glanced at her, but no one else seemed to notice her. Billy softly joined her mother, and took and held her hand.

"Save her to the world?" said Hildreth, but more as an assertion than a question. "To the world of song?"

"No—no—save her from the world."

Mrs. Armstrong gasped. What did this woman mean now? She was a terrible woman, and whatever she wanted done was sure to be done.

Hildreth advanced a step. They were in the sitting-room now, and he drew a chair close to the fire and watched his aunt as she placed herself in it. She flung back her cloak, removed her gloves, and held her white, ringed hands towards the blaze.

When Billy had last seen this woman there were some gray hairs in her head; now her hair was almost white, but it was still abundant, and was very beautiful. She looked wasted, but dominant.

"Yes," she repeated, gazing into the fire. "I am going to save Billy. I owe that to her. I should want to save her, anyway; but, considering the past, I really owe it to her."

Mrs. Armstrong sat down quickly.

"The Lord is coming," she said, in a clear, solemn voice. "He will judge the living and the dead. Let us be ready to meet Him."

Having spoken thus boldly, she was abashed at what she had done.

Miss Runciman turned eagerly towards her. Her large eyes glowed.

"Amen, and amen!" she responded, fervently; "even so, come, Lord Jesus!"

Billy stared uneasily; Hildreth's face showed his irritation and dislike. What was this woman thinking of?

"What is your fad now, Aunt Leonora?" he asked.

"Fad? You are an irreverent boy. Do you call it a fad to be able to come from the darkness into the light?"

Miss Runciman leaned again towards the fire. No one spoke. Presently Mrs. Armstrong rose. She went to Miss Runciman and took one of her hands in both of her own.

"Do you really mean it?" she asked. "You did not come to make my daughter try to sing again?"

"No; I came to save her from such a trial."

Mrs. Armstrong dropped the hand. She hurriedly drew a handkerchief from her pocket and covered her face with it. She sobbed; her slender frame shook.

With a tender look Miss Runciman's eyes dwelt on the slight figure near her.

"I urged my nephew to find Miss Armstrong," she said. "In fact, it was I who did find her. I wanted her to sing. I felt sure that she could. Then the change came to me. A preacher of the gospel who had the spirit of God in him opened my eyes.

I was blind, but now I see. Then it was borne in upon me that I must snatch Billy from her fate. I tried to reason myself out of this conviction, but it was too strong. It was God Himself who was making it too strong. So I had to come. I have feared every moment that it was too late."

Mrs. Armstrong was still weeping quietly.

"Nobody knows how I have suffered," she said. "There in Paris it was dreadful—dreadful. I felt as if I was serving the devil; but I couldn't desert my child. But now, since you, Miss Runciman, who led her away, have come—"

"Mother!" cried Billy.

Mrs. Armstrong raised her head and looked at her daughter, whose features were set.

"Mother, it is too late," said the girl.

Hildreth came nearer; he partially extended his hand, and then drew it back.

"Yes," he said, "you are too late, Aunt Leonora."

Miss Runciman rose. Her cloak fell in a heap to the floor.

"Not too late to save her soul!" she cried.

Hildreth shrugged his shoulders. He was so angry that he hardly knew what to say.

"She doesn't contemplate losing her soul, but she does mean to get back her voice," he returned.

"It is the same thing."

The young man shrugged his shoulders again.

"Aunt," he remarked, "you make me think of those Frenchwomen who, when they were too old to enjoy the dissoluteness they had once enjoyed, took up piety. Somehow I had never expected you to take up piety."

Miss Runciman looked Hildreth over from head to foot. But there was neither anger nor scorn in her face, only regret.

She clasped her hands.

"It is just—it is just," she murmured; then more loudly, "But surely God will give me the victory."

"Aunt, I really can't make out whether you're just posing, or are in earnest."

Still Miss Runciman did not seem angry; her face grew more mournful.

"It is just," she repeated. She turned towards Mrs. Armstrong. "The Lord permits many things which we cannot understand," she continued; "but He sometimes gives power to His instruments. I am an instrument in His hands. He has commanded me to save your daughter from that worldly life. That's why I hastened here when I ought to be in Florida. This chill air makes me suffer; but what of that? Billy," she rose as she spoke—rose slowly, and with a visible effort. She walked to the girl and put a hand on each of her shoulders. She was the taller, and she looked steadily down into the clear eyes that were raised with a resolved expression in them. So unmistakable was this expression that the elder woman's face grew graver yet, if that were possible.

"You used to obey me," said Miss Runciman at last.

"That was when I loved you," was the response.

"Ah!" Something passed across the woman' countenance. "Do you mean," she said, "that you don't love me now?"

Billy hesitated. She could not bear to hurt anyone—unless it seemed necessary.

"Answer me."

"Yes; that is what I mean," bravely. "You have been very cruel to me. I don't believe in you any more ; I can't."

The girl thought that she had never said anything so difficult ; and even as she spoke she was aware of the stirring of the old, unreasonable affection she had once felt for the *prima donna*.

Miss Runciman's hands remained a moment longer on the girl's shoulders ; then they dropped heavily, and she turned away. She went unsteadily to her chair and sank into it, covering her face.

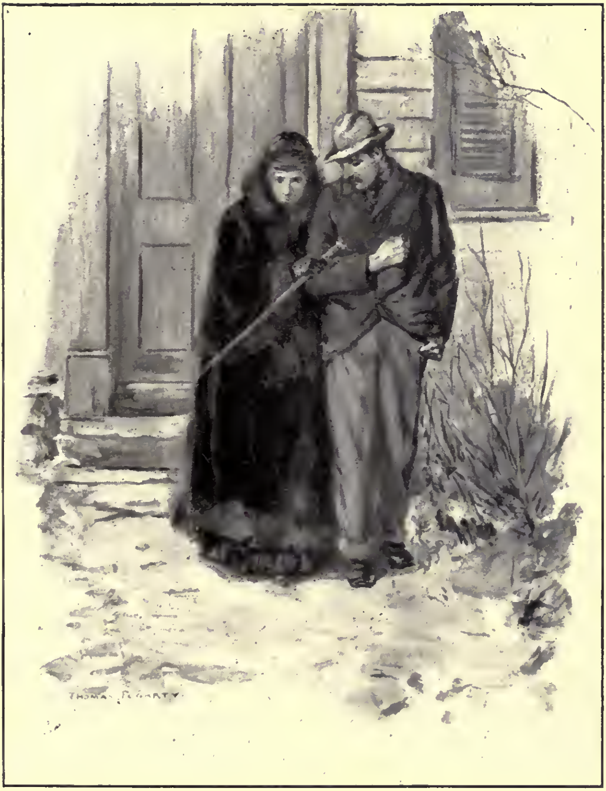
Billy hastened to her side, and drew the cloak up about her. She was thinking that nothing Miss Runciman could have done would have moved her so deeply as this sudden, apparent giving up ; and then the suspicion would come : Did Miss Runciman know that this attitude would be thus moving ? So Billy hardened her heart. Having wrapped the cloak about her, she stood back, leaning against the side of the chimney-piece, and waiting.

The silence in the room was unbroken for a few moments.

At last Miss Runciman looked up and said :

"Vane, will you tell the man who is waiting with his carriage that I am ready to go?"

This was so unexpected that Hildreth hesitated. He did not wish to leave the room ; he distrusted Miss Runciman. When he had left her, before coming to the Meloon farm, she had earnestly—nay, almost fiercely—urged him to go to Wilhelmina Armstrong and see to it that she endeavored to regain her voice. And here she was, possessed by a religious mania that threatened to undo everything. He knew that, as long as it lasted, this mania would override all else. How should he fight it ? He had


THOMAS FOGARTY

"SHE WAS LEANING HEAVILY ON HER NEPHEW'S ARM"

little hope that Billy could successfully combat her mother and Miss Runciman.

"Vane, go," repeated the lady, and he walked out of the room; at the door he cast a pleading look at Billy, but she did not see it; she was looking at their guest.

As the young man shut the door behind him, Miss Runciman turned quickly and held out her hand to the girl.

"Come here!" imperatively. Billy obeyed.

"I forbid you to go back to the old life," she said, sternly. "Your mother forbids it. Never sing another note. It is the devil who tempts you."

"You are too late," said the girl again.

"Oh, Miny!" from her mother.

"Yes, too late. It was not the devil who gave me my voice."

"It was God who took it away from you," solemnly.

"How do you know that? You can't know it; and you shall not talk so to me. I will not stay here."

Billy walked from the room. She met Vane returning. He caught at her sleeve.

"What have you promised?" he whispered, hurriedly.

"Nothing."

She went swiftly up the stairs to her own room. She sat down by the window, leaning her forehead against the glass and watching.

Presently she saw Miss Runciman go towards the carriage; she was leaning heavily on her nephew's arm, and it seemed to the girl that she was weeping. Then Billy felt as if her own heart were breaking. She was used to seeing her mother weep—she expected her to weep; but Leonora Runciman?—

And could it be possible that the woman was right? And had God, indeed, taken away her voice? How could she find out if God had done this thing? If He had, of course it would be wicked to struggle. If He had not—

She started up in painful excitement. She was not going to yield until she had made the attempt. How did people know what God meant? And what one person said He meant was directly opposite to what another person said.

She went down the back stairs that she might not be so likely to meet any one. She wished to be out in the air for a time. She was hurrying along with her head bent when she almost ran into some one.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Meloon. "Has your visitor gone?"

"Yes. Oh, Mr. Meloon, I want your advice; I think you have common-sense; you can reason."

"Thank you; it's more than I can say for myself."

Meloon gazed at the girl an instant in silence; then he said:

"Let us go down the lane."

She walked by his side. He carried a bill-hook in one hand, and as he walked he sometimes struck off a small branch from an oak sapling he had cut down. He did not speak; there was somehow, Billy thought, an atmosphere of out-of-doors about him; a serenity of strength; as if he were immeasurably removed from battles and perplexities; as if he really breathed the air of heaven.

"That was Leonora Runciman," at last said Billy, abruptly.

"Yes," he responded.

"You know her?" in surprise.

"I have heard her sing."

Meloon had trimmed his sapling into a walking-stick.

"I'm going to say one or two things to you, Billy," he began. "You needn't tell me what she came for. No matter what she came for."

"Oh!" sighed the girl, in a relieved manner.

Meloon smiled. He turned and studied the girl's face again.

XIV

ANOTHER TRIAL

"I DON'T see any use in your stifling yourself," Meloon remarked, as if he were saying the most obvious thing. "You are an individual; so long as you do nothing wrong, you have a right to your life, whatever it may turn out to be."

"Yes, yes," from Billy.

"The oracle has spoken," went on Meloon, with a laugh.

"But mother"—hesitatingly.

"That matter is between you and your conscience. As for me, I think your mother is wrong."

"Will you tell her so?"

"Yes; but it will make no difference."

The two were still going up the lane. Billy stopped. She laid a hesitating hand on her companion's arm; she looked up somewhat timidly at him.

"You have done me so much good," she said.

"Then I must have advised you according to your inclinations. That's the way to do if you want a person to take your advice."

"Please shake hands," said Billy.

Meloon held out his hand, and she put hers in it; it was held very closely for an instant.

"You make things seem as if they could be done," she said.

"Do I? That's the next thing to doing them; isn't it?"

But she did not answer. She had left him, and was running back towards the house, running fleetly and with abandon, as an animal moves.

Meloon dropped his stick and his bill-hook; he thrust his hands in his pockets and watched the figure flying along the lane. As he watched, an expression of deep melancholy came to his face. He stood thus until the girl had gone the other side of the corn barn. Then he pulled out a hand to stroke his mustache.

"I make things seem as if they could be done, do I?" he said, aloud. "Well, some things seem to me as if they couldn't be done. A man may be permitted to make a jackass of himself in many ways; but of all the ways, I've chosen the worst. Of course, she can never know whether she's happy or not until she has either regained her voice or knows that she can't. Ah, dear me! I wish I was as wise as I look. But that girl probably thinks me old enough to have gathered the wisdom of centuries into my noddle. I suppose her mother has told her that I was once in love with her—catch a woman to forget to tell that! Well, Serissa was a pretty girl, and I was three years younger, not out of my teens. Can't somebody tell Billy that I'm still really quite young?"

Here Meloon's mustache went up in a satirical smile. He stooped and picked up his bill-hook and his stick. He walked on, but he turned and went away from the house.

Mrs. Armstrong wept, and remonstrated, and prayed, all to no purpose. Her daughter was firm. Then the mother patiently told her that she was ready to go anywhere, even to Paris again, though Paris was only another name for hell.

"But I'm not going anywhere," was the unexpected response. "I shall stay here, for a long time at least. Mr. Hildreth is my teacher. I shall keep on with my work, but I shall do as he says. I shall begin away down, and there are physical exercises to strenghten the muscles of my chest—"

Here Mrs. Armstrong became almost hysterical with her relief. But she made an effort to control her emotion.

"I should think butter-making would be a good exercise," she said.

"So it is; I've grown strong here—I never was so strong in my life. I was worn out there in Paris—I overdid everything—I lived on excitement. Perhaps—oh, mother—perhaps my voice will come back to me! If it only will I shall be the happiest girl in the world!"

She flung her arms about her mother, and put her head down on her shoulder. But she did not cry; her eyes were dry and hot.

The next day she began to follow Hildreth's directions. These at first were almost entirely in reference to her physical well-being: she bathed her throat and chest in cold water; she rubbed her flesh until it glowed. She took deep, full breaths of the clear, cold air; she walked over the fields—she and Lotos, for Hildreth scrupulously refrained from accompanying her. He was never with her save for the few moments when it was necessary to give his directions. They both kept on with their work, having asked and gained permission of the master of the house.

When Billy did essay the first note, her voice roughened across her throat so that she gave one glance of despair at Hildreth, and then sat down and covered her face with her hands.

Hildreth had been leaning against a window-frame with his back to the light. He turned quickly and gazed out-of-doors. A few flakes of snow were beginning to fall; the wind was northeast and whistled shrilly. The young man felt the first feeling of doubt he had known in regard to his success. But he must succeed; he must wrest victory even from defeat. He was rigid with the acuteness of his suffering and his self-control. He must not express any tenderness; he was aware that tenderness would not be tolerated for an instant. Still, if he should be the means of restoring Billy's voice to her, what might not the girl's gratitude do for him? But, aside from any personal plans or hopes, it was true that Hildreth longed strenuously to be the means of giving back to the world this voice that it had yet barely heard. Again he told himself that if Wilhelmina Armstrong were ugly and repulsive he would do just as he was doing now. It matters little whether he would or not; but he liked to think that it mattered.

As soon as he was able he turned towards the room.

"We'll try that again," he said, dryly. "We expect so little now that we can't be disappointed."

Billy looked up in astonishment; but she was a docile and determined pupil, and she immediately obeyed. The result was a trifle better. In half an hour it was better still, but her spirits did not rise. Where was some hint of the volume, the resonance, which had belonged to her tones?

But she said nothing. Just as she was leaving the room, Hildreth spoke.

"Miss Armstrong, I repeat my prediction: in one year from now you shall be a *prima donna.* You have already learned the technicalities. Suddenly—or it will seem suddenly—you will have your power again."

She paused with the door in her hand.

"You are very kind to say so," she said, coldly; "but you can't be right. Still, I am going to give myself a year; for a year I will work."

Then she left the room and went straight to the kitchen, where she brought out flour, and lard, and cake-board, and rolling-pin, and began the making of pie-crust. She worked steadily, like an automaton; her mother, seeing her, did not dare to speak to her, but in her heart she gave a thanksgiving.

When Meloon came into the shed in the rear of the kitchen stamping the snow from his feet, Billy paused in rolling the pie-crust; then she shook her floury hands over the board and went into the shed.

Meloon's shoulders and hat were covered with snow; Trooper and Lotos had entered with him and were shaking themselves.

Meloon removed his hat immediately, and looked eagerly at the girl. He had known that the first lesson was to be given to-day.

Billy had paused just within the door; she was asking herself why she had come out; having asked that question, she turned to go, but Meloon, in a couple of strides, was beside her. His strong eyes shone under his tumbled hair; they shone right into her soul, the girl thought, with encouragement and power.

"I'm glad you came here now," said Meloon, in a tone somewhat different from any she had ever heard from him.

"But I'm sorry," she returned, hurriedly; "it seems so childish."

He had been bending slightly towards her; but he drew back now. He smoothed his hair with a slow gesture, glancing away from her. "I am just three years younger than her mother," he was thinking.

He smiled in that hearty, genial way which she knew so well.

"It isn't childish a bit," he responded. "I saw by your face that you hadn't made a great success of this first lesson. I know your face rather well"—here he paused, and then added, in an extremely matter-of-fact way, but with a twinkle in his eyes:

"'If at first you don't succeed, Try, try again.' 'There's no royal road to success'—and so on. But, you know, I'm not laughing at you. You came out to me because your mother isn't in sympathy with you in this matter, and you know I am. An old fellow like me ought to have gathered up the wisdom of ages. That's just what I've been doing all those years—gathering up wisdom. And now I tell you, Billy, don't be disheartened. With all the rest of my knowledge, I'm a prophet; and I see you victorious—victorious just as you want to be. Don't give up. Dear child—are you crying?"

His voice suddenly dropped and trembled; he was silent.

He saw the tears fall from Billy's eyes.

"I'm just crying because you comfort me," she whispered.

"Keep right on crying then," was the response.

She had put her apron up to her face; and her apron directly became floury from her hands.

"Mr. Hildreth tried to encourage me," she said, behind her veil; "but somehow you always do give me strength."

"I'm glad of that."

"Yes, just to be with you gives me strength, Mr. Meloon. Thank you so much."

"Oh, don't thank me," sharply; "I don't think I can bear that."

She let fall her apron and looked at him.

"Can't you? I'm not going to be as weak as this again. I'm just going right on croaking like a crow for one year—then I shall give it up forever."

She hurried back to the kitchen—she was as good as her word. She never said anything more on the subject, but doggedly kept on. Two afternoons in a week the sitting-room was given up to teacher and pupil. As Hildreth unfolded the theory of the Boldrea method by which he taught, and as Billy understood and practised it, she became interested in one way as if she were watching an experiment outside of herself.

If Hildreth had looked forward to these half-hours when he should be alone with the girl, he must have been greatly disappointed. She was, indeed, alone with him, but he might have been merely a machine, the incarnation simply of his method, for all that she showed to the contrary. She grasped with eagerness and clearness everything he told her; she watched him with an enthusiastic keenness that was touchingly mingled with melancholy. It was plainer and plainer, as the weeks of that winter went on, that Billy was losing heart, though she abated not a whit in her endeavors. She improved; but what of that?—she asked herself. She thought with violent bitterness that in time she might be fitted to take an occasional solo in the village choir. She recalled that other winter that she had spent in studying under the patronage of Miss Runciman. How different that had been. A glorious victory seemed then just before her; she chased it; she caught hold of its flying garments. When she reached this stage of her thoughts they grew black with despair. But she would not give up—not until the year was out. This was her last, her very last struggle. So the winter passed away, swiftly, in spite of its despondence. She was always at work. She felt that she had never had such vigorous health—a spirit of very strength coursed in her blood; her breaths were deep, her chest full. This abounding health sometimes chased away her dark spirits, but not for long. She compared this physical condition with the worn and tense state which she had been in when she had finished her studies in Paris; but it was all too late now.

It fretted her to see that her mother's cheerfulness increased with every week; she knew what that meant. And, notwithstanding his efforts to conceal his growing discouragement, Billy saw that Hildreth was not as hopeful as he had been. She asked him no questions. Once, at the end of a lesson, he burst out with, "You are improving—I don't understand it!" and she had responded as if she had been speaking of a matter indifferent to her: "You will soon be obliged to understand that I am a failure."

"No—no!" the young man had cried, "that is impossible."

"On the contrary, it is not only possible, it is probable."

She had left the room then, and Hildreth had rushed out of the house, hurrying to be alone in the fields. He had to give vent to his excitement somewhere.

This was in March. Not a word had been heard from Miss Runciman since her visit, save for one brief note that she had sent immediately on her arrival at Tampa. This had been addressed to Billy, and of late the girl had formed the habit of reading it over and over with an intensity of indignation which had at last changed to a superstitious fear. This was the note :

"DEAR BILLY ARMSTRONG, — The Boldrea method, if persisted in, can almost perform miracles; but God is greater than the Boldrea method, and God will save your soul, I do believe, even in spite of you. You will be studying this winter, but I shall be doing more than that. Listen to what I shall do: I shall pray morning, noon, and night that you may fail — fail for the sake of your everlasting salvation. And God will be on my side; God will answer me. I owe this to you, for I was the cause of your serving Satan by becoming an opera-singer. Now I am going to snatch you as a brand from the burning pile. Remember, while you work to get back your voice, I shall wrestle with God to keep your voice from you. Your mother mingles her prayers with mine."

This note Billy always wore about her person. She had a notion that if she had it with her, she could combat it with a greater chance of success, for she had come to regard the resolution of Miss Runciman as a kind of spell. Perhaps she could not succeed in any fight against this spell. Was she fighting against God? At last it came about that she would lie awake nights thinking of those prayers, and she became aware that she was losing her courage, and to lose her courage meant that she was losing the battle.

April had come; it was very mild; the singing of birds was heard in the land. Of course it would be cold enough again to freeze in the night, but now the snow that had been lying in long, sloping banks at the north side of walls and fences was disappearing; a faint vapor could be seen rising from it into the warm sunshine. The sap in the maple-trees was running—"sapping-time" was here.

All day the men were up the hill at the sapping-house among the maples. At noon Billy would start out with her skirts pinned up and with rubber boots on her feet, carrying two tin pails heavy with the dinner for the men. Lotos always went with her, but Trooper stayed up at the hut in the woods night and day, sleeping beside the mattress on which his master slept. Meloon never left the boiling of the sap to any one else. There was a strong delight to him in striding about at midnight with his lantern in his hand and Trooper at his heels among the trees, taking down the buckets full of sap from their pegs, and putting others in place.

He was alone in the world. Sometimes the wind was soft and sweet, sometimes it rushed in cold blasts from the north. Two or three times on moonlight nights he had seen in the distance the dim bulk of a bear, and heard the crush of branches beneath its feet; and often he heard the sharp bark of a fox. But this year there was a subtle melancholy—almost a regret—for which he could not account; at the same time these solitary hours brought with them a delicate happiness which he had never known before. There was some grimness in his resolution not to try to analyze these emotions; it was enough to feel them.

One day he was on the slope of the hill selecting some trees to tap for the first time; he had his bit in his hand and his basket of little wooden spiles on his arm. He heard a sound in the path below him, and, glancing down, saw Billy and Lotos ascending. He had seen them coming on other days, but something suddenly assured him that this was a day different from other days.

He watched the girl; she did not see him, and he could look at her intently.

XV

"IT HAS COME!"

IT was but a moment before Billy raised her eyes.

"You ought to harness the brown horse into the light cart—it's too much for you to walk up with those heavy pails."

The girl had reached the man's side as he finished speaking. Face and eyes were glowing. She set down the pails and threw back her shoulders.

"I like to do it," she said.

She came yet nearer. Meloon had an impulse to put his hand above his eyes as he saw fully the effulgence of hers.

"What has happened?" he asked. "Have you been singing?"

"No—no; but I think I can—I think I can. I have just torn up Miss Runciman's letter. I tore it into bits, and I trampled the bits into the mud under my feet."

Meloon did not smile. Her gravity was too great for him even to wish to smile at this announcement.

"Well?" he said, gravely.

"Why, I have broken the spell; don't you see?" with a laugh. "Not that I believe in spells in the very least; but all the same, I'm glad that letter is beaten into the earth. Miss Runciman is a strange woman. She gets hold of one, and she holds on—somehow. Oh, I feel free!"

Meloon contemplated the girl in silence for a moment before he said:

"Do you mean that you are free because you have given up?"

"No—no; but my strength has reached my voice; I think so. I dare to try, with hope."

She turned away with her hands clasped, as if at that instant she were going to sing; but she turned back again directly to ask:

"Do you know, Mr. Meloon, what an odd notion I've had ever since I began taking these lessons?"

She had gone nearer to her companion as she put this question.

"How can I know? Of course you've had odd notions—"

"Being a woman?" she interrupted. She laughed; but she blushed slightly as she went on. "Yes, I've all the time believed that if I did sing, for the first time it would not be for Mr. Hildreth; it would be for you. You know you give me strength—" She spoke these words with a solemn earnestness: "'Tis as if I felt your character — leaned on it, some way. Do you think me very silly, Mr. Meloon?"

The man had moved so that only his profile was visible. Billy fancied that there was a setness to his face, and she exclaimed:

"You do think me silly, I'm afraid. But I don't believe you know what it has been to me to be near you all these months. You don't pose for anything. I don't suppose you have any idea that you're more than a common man," she smiled. "But I'm not blind, though I am an ignorant girl, with only one idea in my head. I—"

"Won't you stop?"

Meloon's manner was so abrupt that Billy started back a step.

He walked away a few yards. When he returned he burst into a laugh.

"I beg your pardon, Billy," he exclaimed, "but I'm not laughing at you. I'm laughing at myself. I'm not in the least the sort of creature you imagine; I'm made up of the roughest kind of clay, and at this very moment I'm as weak as a rabbit; so weak, in fact, that lest I say the most ridiculous things a man ever said, I'm going to run away to the sap-house. But you may come, too. Here, I'll take those dinner-pails."

They walked on slowly up the uneven, steep path. There was no snow here save in hollows and ruts—soft snow that let their feet down suddenly if they unwarily stepped upon it.

Billy's superb breathing-power served her faultlessly; indeed, she had a sense of revelling in her strong physical condition.

"I've sent the men over to the west sappin'-house," said Meloon, when they reached the hut, "but I expect them back directly. Sit on this stool."

He began to throw wood into the huge fire-box under the long iron sap-troughs. The sap was boiling rapidly and sending off volumes of steam of a faint sweet odor.

Billy sat down as she had been directed; but she could not remain seated.

The two dogs were nosing among the wet moss and sodden leaves. There were only flickers of sunlight in the place. The flames roared and snapped up the chimney; a gentle wind came through the chinks in the wall and at the open door.

Billy's spirits were rising with every moment. She strolled in front of the house. She stooped to hug Lotos, who had begun to walk behind her. When she stood erect she inflated her lungs once or twice, then she began to sing:

> "The mountain sheep were sweeter,
> But the valley sheep were fatter;
> We, therefore, deemed it meeter
> To carry off the latter.
> We made an expedition;
> We met a force and quelled it;
> We took a strong position,
> And killed the men who held it."

She sang as she had never sung in her life before, even though she was singing out-of-doors, with no walls to restrain and preserve the sound.

The volume, the sweetness, the dramatic power of her voice astonished even herself.

Meloon had in his hand a long stick of green maple with which he was in the habit of poking the fire. He leaned on this stick and gazed at the girl, who was standing just without the door. As her notes swelled on the air her listener's strong, eagle face melted in all its lines until it might almost have been the face of a woman who is moved to the soul.

As the girl stopped singing Meloon made a quick movement towards her, his eyes alight, ten—nay, twenty—years taken from his aspect. For the instant he was the fiery, hopeful young man; but before Billy had seen him, he had changed. He stood perfectly still; he covered his eyes with his hand for the briefest space; then he advanced to the door. Before he could speak, Billy had sprung towards him. She caught hold of his hands and held them fast. She was pale; even her mouth was white.

"Oh!" she cried. "It has come! It has come! I sang! Did you hear me?"

"Yes," he answered. He found that he could not command his voice, so he said nothing more.

"And I never sang so well—never!"

No answer.

"I say," as one who must speak or suffocate, "I certainly never sang so well."

No answer.

The color was coming back to Billy's face.

She loosed her hold on her companion's hands, and began to walk restlessly again. She returned to the door, where Meloon was standing watching her. She asked, hesitatingly:

"Do you like my voice, Mr. Meloon?"

"Yes, more than I can tell." He was quite calm and steady now, and therefore seemed a little cold.

"And you're glad?" she persisted.

"Very."

He was thinking that now she would go away; she would never return to his farm, and he repeated: "I'm very glad. You see, Billy, I can't say any more than that if I talked an hour."

"I understand. And I was right, Mr. Meloon, in thinking that my voice would come back when I was with you. That wasn't just a fancy, was it?"

"I sha'n't quarrel with a fancy like that, at any rate," was the reply.

The speaker was rapidly stirring the boiling sap, raising a ladleful and letting it drop, apparently watching it intently. Billy was near him, her eyes also fixed on the dripping sap.

"'Tisn't ready, of course," she said, absently.

"Oh no; it won't be syruped down for a long time. I wonder where those men are." His eyes went to the door, but no one was coming. There was nobody near but Billy and the two dogs.

The girl turned and looked out. The doorway was full of flickering sunlight.

"You'll be going to Boston or New York directly now, I suppose," said Meloon, who was still stirring the sap.

"And you'll lose your hired girl, you mean," smiling absently.

"Yes, that's what I mean."

"Oh, I'll give you warning."

"It seems to me I'm entitled to a month's warning."

"A week won't do?"

"Oh no," strongly. Meloon flung in more wood. "I shall need more than a week to supply your place."

"I've made very good butter, haven't I?"

"Very."

Billy thought there was something harsh in her companion's voice, and she wondered at it. Then she thought of something else.

"Poor mother!" she said, and sighed. She laughed. "If my cup of glory is full, there'll be that drop of bitterness in it—poor mother!" and she sighed again.

There was the sound of heavy steps, the crackling of twigs, and voices.

"There come the men," she said. She left the hut, and she and Lotos went lightly down the hill, she with her head upthrown, taking no thought of her steps, but never slipping or falling.

She went faster and faster until, when she came near the house, she was running. She hurried from room to room until she reached her mother's chamber.

Mrs. Armstrong was sitting with a shawl about her shoulders, reading the Bible.

"The p'tatoes wa'n't quite done," she began, "and I had a minute to spare, so—but, Miny, has anything happened?"

She rose so suddenly that her book dropped to the floor. She seemed to jump at her daughter, so quickly did she reach her side.

"I can sing, mother!"

"God forbid!"

"God be thanked, I say."

Billy turned and went down the stairs. Her nerves were so alive that she felt that she could not bear anything. And to be treated like a criminal now!

She could not eat, and as she saw Hildreth coming in from the barn she left the kitchen.

Mrs. Armstrong scrupulously began to put the dinner on the table. When Hildreth had reached the stage of wiping his hands on the great roller-towel in preparation for the meal, he glanced at Mrs. Armstrong, and directly asked the same question of her that she had asked of her daughter—

"Has anything happened?"

Mrs. Armstrong dropped the platter of boiled mutton.

"She can sing," she answered.

Hildreth did not try to speak. He stood an instant, then he walked to the door.

"Don't keep the dinner for me," he said at last; "I sha'n't want any," and he left the room.

Mrs. Armstrong carefully gathered the mutton from the floor, and then she added still more tea to the tea-pot, and presently sat down to drink a cup of very strong brew. So the fact of Billy's being able to sing seemed to deprive three people of the power to eat their dinners.

XVI

AN ACCIDENT

"OF course, I shall go with you," said Mrs. Armstrong, the next day.

She had entered her daughter's room just after breakfast.

"I shall go with you because you are my child, and I would follow you into a den of lions—and the sooner the lions eat us up the better, I say!"

The last words were uttered shrilly. Billy was sitting at the window. She rose and hurried to her mother. She put her arms about her neck.

"I must be a singer, mother."

"It's against the Lord's will."

"I must be a singer," with a sterner note in her voice.

At this the mother put her head down on the girl's shoulder and began to sob and cry aloud. Billy held her close, feeling very wicked indeed, but not relenting in the least.

At last the girl said:

"I'm not going to talk about this any more; and if you think it's wrong for you to go with me, don't go."

"Oh, but I must. If you're wicked, Miny, I'll be wicked too. I can't be separated from you—I can't."

Whereat she kissed the girl, and wept harder than before.

Billy never could recall very clearly the days which followed immediately. She sang for Hildreth again and again, many different kinds of music. There was no doubt but that her voice had returned. She had a future, she told herself.

It being already April, there seemed nothing to be done, save the making of preliminary arrangements, until the fall. Hildreth eagerly took upon himself those arrangements. He predicted success for the next opera season.

"It is an age until then," he exclaimed. "And I shall sing with you!"

Here he could not help flashing a glance at Billy, who received it, as one might say, opaquely, giving no response whatever.

One day, after many consultations with Hildreth, Billy stood watching for Meloon's return from the village. She intended to ask him if he would continue to hire her until the early fall. She wished to stay there; she could think of no other place where she would like so well to stay.

"And I will remind him of my skill in butter-making," she thought.

She was in high spirits. The April of this year had been like May; the earth was already awakened for the summer, or so it seemed to the girl.

She left the steps of the door, and walked down the yard. It was just sunset, and the level and brilliant light lay upon the house, the farm-buildings, and the orchard. She could not hear a sound save the ringing of the milk into the empty pail from the barn-yard where Hildreth had just begun to milk. Robins and blue-birds were flying about, their little forms outlined clearly against the glow as they swept here and there.

Billy wore a shawl, but it was half falling from her shoulders.

"Miny, where are you going?" called her mother from the house.

Hildreth heard, and paused in his milking. He was continually telling himself that he wouldn't stand the happy wretchedness of his being thus with Billy. A score of times he had been on the point of throwing up the whole thing and going away; or he would have declared that he had been on the point of doing this, but at the same time he knew that he would on no account have gone. He had believed that when Billy could sing, things would somehow be different; if they were different now it was only that everything about the girl seemed more elusive. He did not understand.

He listened, and heard the reply:

"I'm going down to meet Mr. Meloon."

Hildreth began to milk again, thrusting out a foot viciously as he did so, and then striking the cow fiercely for stepping.

Billy walked slowly. She had not yet heard the sound of the horses' feet on the main road. The wind was the right way for her to hear the colts plainly as they came over the north road.

She stopped and leaned against a young maple. The sun dipped down below the horizon, and in a few moments more it seemed like night.

"I will go back," she thought. "Perhaps the dampness will affect my throat."

But she did not go back; she went on a few steps, then stood still. A waft of wind now brought to her the sound of the quick moving of horses' feet.

"There are the colts!" she exclaimed. "They have only just turned on to the north road, but across the pastures it is not so far."

The sound came still plainer, and then stopped. She heard two shots fired. Meloon often took his rifle.

It was dark now. She wondered why the sound had stopped so suddenly. She had heard teams coming so many times over there, with the wind this way, and ordinarily the noise of their coming grew louder and louder until they had gone down the Ledge Hill; then the thick intervening woods shut off the sound for a long time.

Billy began to be afraid, and then to smile at herself for being afraid.

"The colts must have begun to go down the hill when I heard them so plainly," she thought; "and it was the colts, I never mistake their gait."

She walked back and forth across the path a few times, pausing often to listen. How still the night was; only the frogs in the low places kept up an unceasing din. She wished they would stop.

A quarter of an hour passed in this way; then Billy hurried with a decisive movement towards the house; when she entered the kitchen, however, where her mother was mixing dough for bread, she had no appearance of hurry.

"Is Mr. Hildreth at the barn now?" she asked.

"No; he's gone up to the sheep pasture. I told him he missed it; he had to take a lantern; but he forgot to do something by daylight; he's gittin' kind of forgetful."

Billy left the room. She went to the wood-house and took another lantern that hung there; she started for the barn, but went back to say that she was going to ride down the lane; and she hurried away before any questions could be asked.

In five minutes she had saddled the horse which she had begun to use a month ago. As she rode from the yard she said again that she didn't see why she was frightened. She made the horse stand still that she might listen. Nothing could be heard but the frogs, and they were vociferating in jubilation that spring had come. The girl moved uneasily in her saddle. By this time the colts ought to be in the lane; she ought to be able to hear them plainly.

She went on, suddenly possessed by a sense of hurry that drove her as if with a whip.

At the end of the lane was a heavy gate, always kept closed and hooked. Here she was obliged to dismount; the gate stuck, and then it gave suddenly, and she almost fell. She scrambled someway back to her saddle from the fence, leaving the gate open. She was now at the top of a long hill, and her horse must walk nearly all the way down. She sat far back in her seat, clutching the bridle nervously in cold fingers.

How Meloon would laugh at her when he saw him! —but she would not let him know; she would pretend that she was riding out to enjoy the mild evening.

That was Trooper barking far away; as far away as Ledge Hill, she thought. She held up her horse an instant that she might listen more closely. If Meloon were at Ledge Hill and should shout, she might hear him. But he did not shout. Then she fancied there was a distressful and pleading accent in the dog's voice. She urged her horse on again, until he galloped down the last pitch in the road before her, then stretched himself out along the level that followed. Lotos was racing on behind; even in the midst of the clatter of her horse's hoofs she heard the dog panting, and the occasional scratching of his feet in the gravel, and the sounds comforted her.

The level space was short, and she must ascend another hill ; the country was nothing but hills and valleys. She had begun this ascent when there was a great clatter and skurry ahead of her ; then immediately, dimly seen in the dusk, a horse came full pelt down the highway ; something was rattling at his heels. He came and passed as if he were a ghost, a thing of air, save for the noise he made. Billy's horse jumped out of the way and stood at the roadside, snorting and quivering ; he refused to go on ; more than that, he made a bolt towards home, with his head down and his ears flattened.

Roused now to a fury of indignation and terror, the girl sawed away at the horse's mouth with all her strength, and her strength was considerable. But not until the animal was nearly at the brow of the long hill, whose top was at the gate, did she make any impression upon him. Then he stopped still, so unexpectedly that his rider barely escaped being flung over his head ; but she stuck to the saddle. In the next moment she had satisfied herself that she could not force him to turn about. He stood quivering from his run up the hill, his feet obstinately planted.

So Billy slipped down to the ground and let the animal go, not thinking until too late what a fright he would give those people left at the farm-house. Too late she wished she had tied him to the fence. Long before this the horse she had met must have reached its house. Somebody—Hildreth, of course—would come.

Meantime she could not stand still and wait. Instead of going towards the farm, she turned and ran down the hill.

XVII

BY THE ROAD-SIDE

AS she ran, Billy felt certain that Hildreth would presently overtake her; but the moments went by, and no one did overtake her. Her feet were like lead and her heart beat chokingly. But she kept on running, up hill and down, save once in a while for an instant's pause. At last, in one of these pauses, some one called out:

"Hullo!"

Billy stopped short and tried to see as well as hear; but the night had thickened with clouds.

"Hullo!" she cried, in return.

"I hope it's a good Samaritan," said the voice; and now Billy was sure that it was Meloon who spoke; and he couldn't be very badly off to use such a phrase. She remained motionless as she had stopped. Then she said:

"Yes, I'm a Samaritan."

"That's lucky. I wonder where the other colt is."

"Gone home. Where are you?"

"Pitched into a hollow here. It's Billy, isn't it?"

"Yes—where *are* you?"

"I told you—in this hollow. I'm not sure but that there are a bear and a horse on top of me—no more, I hope. So it's Billy?"

"Yes, yes. Do you think I can help you?"

"Of course; it would be a mere trifle for you to lift a bear and a horse off me, wouldn't it?"

The girl wondered at the gayety in his voice.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I ought not to have come alone! Now I can't help you."

Meloon spoke something indistinctly, then plainly:

"I always felt sure you had a kind heart."

To this remark Billy made no response. She had slowly followed the guidance of his voice, and was now in one of those gullies which the rains make by the sides of these mountain roads. She stumbled.

"Here."

His hand was extended and she took it, feeling hopeful as its fingers clasped firmly about hers.

"Thank you; it's a good hand," he said.

Silence, during which Billy tried to make out what was that bulk lying blackly before her; but the night was very dark.

"If you could get to my waistcoat you might find a match," said Meloon; but he did not relinquish her hand.

"I can't take a bear and a horse off you, even if I had a light," responded Billy, following his lead.

"True; and you would need your hand; it's a good hand."

"Oh, if somebody would only come!"

She could not restrain this cry.

"Don't worry about that, since you have come."

Silence again.

"Can't I do anything, Mr. Meloon?"

"Not more than you're doing now."

"But that is nothing."

"It doesn't seem nothing to me."

"Where are you hurt?"

"Really, I can't tell you. At first I thought my back and legs were broken. But now I conclude that I don't know anything about it."

Billy sat down on the edge of the gully that she might be nearer her companion.

"Is it very inconvenient for you to hold my hand?" he asked.

"No."

"Yes, I always did believe that you had a kind heart, in spite of—"

"In spite of what?" as he paused.

"Your ambition."

"Am I ambitious?" wonderingly.

Meloon laughed.

"Was Cæsar ambitious? And certainly there is no such hardener of the heart as ambition. But you are surely a kind little girl. Where's Hildreth?" suddenly, and with a curious sharpening of tone.

"He had gone up into the sheep pasture."

"Oh, well, if he's prowling about in the sheep pasture with a lantern, he won't be here for a long time."

To Billy's unspeakable wonder there seemed something like gratitude in Meloon's way of speaking these words.

"Perhaps some one may be driving along this road," she suggested.

"Perhaps; in that case it will be our duty to hail him."

"Hail him? I would shout after him; I would run and drag him here."

"Would you? It strikes me that you are very anxious to terminate this interview."

"Mr. Meloon, you puzzle me. Are you suffering much?"

This manner of conversation at such a time so confused the girl that she hardly knew what to say; and the darkness bewildered her still more.

"I'm not suffering at all just now, except from constraint. I must be seriously damaged in some way. It was not enough that I should be old enough to be your father, Miss Armstrong, but I must be 'mulcted for a man.' Well, I do have the luck!"

Billy heard him, for she replied after a fashion, but it was quite evident that she did not understand, evident also that Meloon did not wish her to understand, for he added, hurriedly:

"I believe I'm talking nonsense. This is almost as good as an opera scene, isn't it? Do you think the chorus will be coming in soon?"

All this time he had been holding Billy's hand.

"Oh," she cried, "I wish you wouldn't talk like that!"

"How, then? Moan and cry?"

"Yes; shriek, do anything. You frighten me with your good spirits. I have just conceived a horrible idea that nothing is alive but your head—you're dead from your head down."

"But I'm holding your hand."

"So you are! Thank Heaven for that!"

Then Billy sobbed shortly a few times, but directly pulled herself up and remained very quiet. Once she leaned down and pressed her cheek to the hand that grasped her hand. She sobbed again, and Meloon whispered, "Hush! Hush!"

Then neither spoke for a long time; perhaps they were listening to the night sounds, the flutter of tree branches in the mysterious wind; the faint noises in the wood, as if fairies were stepping about.

"Don't you think I ought to run home and find Mr. Hildreth?" at length from Billy.

"No; the chances are that you'd meet him. And as it's four miles the other way to a house, the only course left for you is to stay here and keep the wolves from me."

Having spoken thus, Meloon asked, quickly:

"How came you to notice that I wasn't at home?"

"As if a person wouldn't know when the master of the house was away!" unconsciously she continued in his tone.

"But tell me," he insisted.

"I was out in the yard walking about, and I heard the colts when they began to go down this hill. And then I heard two shots."

"How came you in the yard? Why weren't you baking, or sweeping, or washing? I pay you wages, Miss Armstrong; I shall see to it that you earn them. How came you in the yard?"

"I was expecting you; I was waiting for you."

"Ah!"

"Somehow I felt worried."

Meloon did not speak this time; his fingers closed still more firmly about Billy's hand.

In another moment they both heard the sound of a horse approaching at a gallop. Trooper, who had been lying pressed close against his master since the girl had come, rose quickly, growling provisionally.

"Hildreth to the rescue," said Meloon, "but I suppose a man can't have everything precisely as he wants it."

He laughed; but he subdued the laugh quickly and added: "I had been hoping to be one to clap my hands and swing my kerchief when you sing to them next fall. I wanted to see the crowds rise at you, and then to say to somebody, 'That's the girl who made the butter on my farm last summer—and she made good butter, too.' But, as I said, a man can't have everything just as he wants it. There's Hildreth—he's running the horse up hill—he came with the cart—that's bright of him. But why is he shouting your name, I should like to know?"

"Miss Armstrong! Miss Armstrong!"

The cry was prolonged and imperative with anxiety.

"He needn't call you," said Meloon.

"I started on horseback—" began Billy, hurriedly, but she was interrupted by Meloon's demanding, swiftly:

"Were you thrown?"

"No—but the horse was frightened when the colt came dashing down, and he wouldn't come on; he went back."

"I'm sorry for your mother; I'm sorry—"

But he did not finish his sentence.

The cry came again; Billy stood up and answered it by a long, clear call.

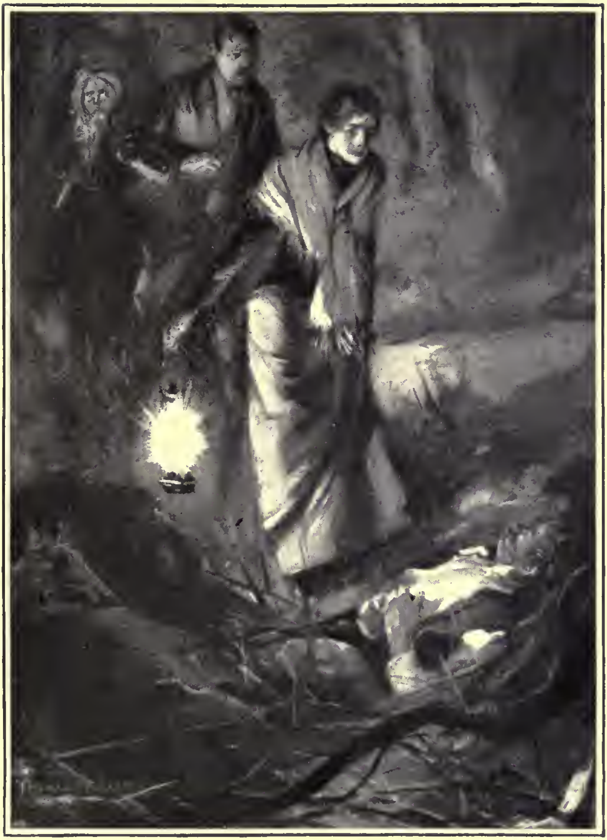
There was no response, but in a moment she saw the yellow gleam of a lantern as the sound of wheels and hoofs came yet nearer. She saw Hildreth standing and driving. The lantern was fastened below the cart, and its light was cast all about. Close behind Hildreth, sitting on the bottom of the light cart, and holding to the sides, the girl saw dimly her mother, whose pale face and wild eyes seemed almost to cast a light of themselves. As she looked, her mother rose and leaned forward.

"Miny, are you there?"

Billy had come forward directly.

"Are you hurt, Miny?"

For answer the girl reached forward both arms and almost lifted her mother to the ground.



"THEY SAW MELOON'S FACE, WHITE, WITH BRIGHT EYES"

"Mr. Meloon is hurt," she said.

But Mrs. Armstrong could not speak at first. She stood and clung to her daughter with the selfishness of anxiety; she had heard Billy say that Mr. Meloon was hurt, but she did not care so long as her child was safe.

Hildreth had jumped out of the cart and stood staring at Billy.

In the first moment of relief he could not hold himself steady; he was afraid to speak lest his voice should tremble.

Suddenly he stepped forward and took the girl's hand; he kissed it ardently again and again.

"It's been hell since your horse came home with the empty saddle," he said, thickly.

Billy shrank away.

"I'm safe," she returned. "Let us help Mr. Meloon."

"Yes, yes," eagerly, from Hildreth.

He hurriedly unfastened the lantern and brought it; Billy snatched it from him and went forward to the gully by the road-side. Immediately they saw Meloon's face, white, with bright eyes, lying on a tuft of the withered brake of the summer before. He raised his head, watching the girl. One of the colts lay close by him—indeed, part of its body was lying across Meloon's legs, and close to the other side was the black bulk of a bear. The bear was quite evidently dead, but the horse turned its eyes towards the new-comers.

"Almost romantic, isn't it?" asked Meloon. "It was the bear that frightened the colts out of their senses. Don't look so scared, Serissa; bears do come down from the mountains sometimes, and they sometimes get shot. I'll tell you all about it, if it's ever necessary. I thought the other colt would never get free of the carriage; he fought like mad to get away; I suppose he smashed the carriage somewhere. I managed to cut the harness for this poor fellow. Poor fellow!" he reached his hand out and touched the horse. "It's a cursed piece of business anyway. Now see if you can take home this carcass of mine—it might as well be a carcass."

Billy fancied that Meloon's voice was weaker, though he kept up his appearance of strength, and what she called reckless cheerfulness.

The two women worked with Hildreth, and they had need to do so. Meloon did not betray in the least that it hurt him to be extricated from his position—and extricated so awkwardly. He coolly gave directions when they were needed. When at last he was placed on the floor of the cart, he became so strangely still that Billy held the lantern near him.

"Mother," she said, "he has fainted."

And so he had.

XVIII

BROUGHT HOME

THEY got him home; how they did it Billy never quite knew. She did not go with them.

The doctor lived four miles away.

"The cart is light," she said to Vane. "Think how much time will be wasted in getting to the village."

"But what do you mean?" asked the young man.

He was stooping to get the reins, which had fallen to the ground, while one strap was round a hind leg of the horse.

"I mean that, perhaps, you can drag the cart home—it's not so very far, and mother will push behind, if necessary."

"Oh yes," said Mrs. Armstrong, not knowing in the least at what Miny was driving; "I will do anything. Oh, Miny, do you think he will die?"

"No; he isn't going to die," fiercely. "Will you, Vane?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I shall take the horse and ride him to the village. I shall bring back the doctor."

"'But there is no saddle."

Billy stamped her foot.

"And no embroidered saddle-cloth!" she cried. "When I was a child I didn't need a saddle. I can go now without one. *Will* you help, Vane?"

She was hurriedly unfastening buckles while her mother held the lantern.

"I think I'm willing to help," said Hildreth, with some appearance of sulkiness. But he took hold effectively. It was hardly a moment before the horse was led from the shafts and stood with nothing on save his bridle.

Billy was going to spring up from the wheel, but Hildreth hastened to her. He extended his hand and tossed her on to the horse's back. She sat the animal astride, as she had ridden her father's horses over the pastures many a time in the old days.

"Oh, Billy," cried Hildreth, in a terror, "I shall take you down. You will fall."

"No, you sha'n't take me down, and I sha'n't fall."

She struck the horse with her heels and he sprang forward. In an instant she had gone into the darkness, and they heard the sharp, quick sound of the iron-shod feet, heard it for a moment before it became indistinct, as she turned the corner that led behind a shoulder of the hill.

Hildreth did not speak, save to ask Mrs. Armstrong if she would hold the lantern while he turned the cart.

The road was narrow and at a steep pitch, and it was hard work, but he accomplished it.

Trooper was already in the bottom of the cart beside his master. He was whining desolately, and sometimes licking Meloon's face.

"It's down-hill," said Hildreth to Mrs. Armstrong, when he had put a stone in front of each forward wheel. "I shall have all I can do not to tumble over myself when I get started. I want you to get into the cart and stay there for the present. Don't be frightened; I shall try to keep my feet."

"I shall not be frightened," was the answer.

She got into the cart; she sat down on the floor and took Meloon's head in her lap. On the other side was Trooper.

Hildreth put himself in the shafts, and then dexterously kicked the stones from the wheels. He started cautiously enough, but as the cart rolled after him it was as much as he could do to keep his footing. Before he had gone six rods he heard the shrill, remonstrant whinny of the colt left there alone. The sound made him involuntarily waver, and the vehicle tried to rush upon him. He, also, had grown strong and muscular during his stay at the farm. He braced back doggedly.

"She thought I could do it," he whispered, as the sweat started out on his face. And the next moment that horse up there whinnied again.

"Can't we do anything for the colt?" called out Mrs. Armstrong.

Hildreth made no attempt at a reply; he was cursing silently and wondering how some women could be so inconsequent.

It was of no use; he couldn't do it, and he had been a fool to try. The cart would push him out of the way and go on at its own will to destruction.

He struggled not to run, but in spite of himself he had to break into a little trot, pushing back with all his might. The sweat now dropped from his face.

"If I don't come to one of those 'holdbacks' within a minute, we'll all go to the devil together."

This was what he was thinking. He set his teeth as his thought added, "And a good thing, too; the sooner the better."

But he did come to a short level space, and then the hummock made for carriages to rest upon on their way down. As the wheels stopped Hildreth sat down on the shaft. He felt as if his lungs were so swollen that he could not breathe; but he must breathe so that he could get his charges to the house; then it made little difference to him whether he kept on breathing or not.

"I'd have taken them down a ten-mile hill, all the same, if she had said so."

He drew his arm across his wet face.

"I'm in hopes he's coming to," said Mrs. Armstrong, in the cart.

Hildreth made no reply.

He rose and started again, bracing until the muscles of his back and legs seemed to crack with the strain.

And he succeeded, for luckily he had passed over the worst part of the hill.

"What if I should stumble," as he let himself race down the last more gentle slope so that the impetus might carry him a short distance up the next hill that he must climb before he came to the gate to the Meloon farm.

When his breath and strength threatened to give out he drew the cart half across the road, and was fortunate enough to find a stone and thrust it under a wheel.

"You'll have to push, I'm afraid, Mrs. Armstrong," he said, huskily.

"Yes, yes," was the answer. She scrambled out at the end of the cart.

But before they started a voice from the floor of the cart called out, faintly:

"Who's pulling this thing?"

"I told you he was coming to," remarked Mrs. Armstrong, from the rear.

"I say, who's pulling this thing?"

Hildreth rose.

"It's all right, Mr. Meloon," he answered, "you're perfectly safe."

"I didn't ask if I was safe. I'm not the most precious thing in the world."

Here a cough interrupted any further words.

Hildreth leaned against the side. The lantern had been fastened beneath again, where it threw light upon the road; therefore, the two men could not see each other.

"I'm taking you home." Hildreth felt that he would be obliged to reply.

"You! Great heaven! Stop it, then."

No response. Hildreth took his place and lifted the shafts again.

"I forbid you to do it."

Hildreth had forgotten the blockading-stone. He stepped back and removed it. Then he began to pull and Mrs. Armstrong to push.

"If you will do it," said Meloon, "here's Trooper, who weighs a hundred and thirty pounds. Make him get out. Go, Trooper; I'm all right; jump out, old fellow. I can't talk any more."

He choked and was silent. The dog jumped to the ground as the cart was making its slow way; he placed himself in the rear, and with his nose at the tail-board followed his master.

Meloon said nothing when they reached the house. He tried to help get himself into the sitting-room, and he did help, though it was hard.

At last he dropped onto the lounge, and Hildreth thrust pillows under his head.

"Where's Billy?" asked Meloon.

"She rode the horse to the village."

Meloon's eyes were closed, but Hildreth saw the great mustache curve upward in a smile.

"Plucky little girl!" he murmured.

Mrs. Armstrong ran hither and yon for hot water, and flannel, and brandy; but Meloon stopped her.

"Don't do a thing till the doctor comes," he said.

He lay there, still with his eyes shut. The big St. Bernard had placed himself by the couch, and his black muzzle was resting close to his master's shoulder. Sometimes he put his tongue gently on the cheek near him.

"Good fellow," whispered Meloon. "We've been through a good many things, but this is the worst, eh?"

Meloon seemed to have a great desire to talk, as is often the case when talking is difficult.

Hildreth, his face purple, and his lungs still aching, stood by for a few moments until he saw there was nothing to do.

Then he went out-of-doors and hurried towards the road, as if by so doing he could hasten the doctor's arrival. He walked restlessly about, and before he had thought it possible he heard the sound of hoofs and wheels coming like mad down Ledge Hill. Then at last the doctor's sulky flew by him, followed by another shape—the horse Billy had ridden, galloping by himself behind the sulky.

Hildreth turned and ran after them; he came up as the doctor jumped to the ground; he was in time to lift Billy down, for the doctor had insisted that she crowd into the little carriage with him. She did not notice Hildreth any more than if he had been a machine.

The young man caught her sleeve.

"I think the old gentleman will pull through," he said.

She turned in a fury on him.

"What!" she cried.

He retreated a step; he could have raised his arm as if to ward off a blow. He stared in amazement. Wasn't that good news, then?

"I think he's sure to pull through," he repeated.

"Oh!" she breathed. She ran past him.

She stood a moment at the door of the sitting-room; her mother and the doctor were in there.

As she turned, a hurried step sounded, and the door was opened a bit. The doctor's gray head was thrust out.

"Oh, you? I thought 'twas the young fellow. Send him in here."

Billy obeyed; then she went on up to her own room. She sat down by the window and was perfectly quiet until she began to shiver. She rose and brought a shawl, which she wrapped about her, resuming her place. Lotos scratched at the door; she rose again and let him in. This time she sat down on the floor and held the dog's head and shoulders in her lap. She spoke only once, and then it was to say:

"I'm so glad you can't talk, Lotos."

It seemed a long time before some one came up the stairs. This was Mrs. Armstrong; she came in carrying a small, lighted kerosene lamp; but though she had this lamp she stumbled against her daughter, who drew herself back, but not far enough.

The elder woman caught at a chair, her lamp tilting so that the flame splintered the glass chimney, which fell to the floor; the blaze flickered out and left a rank odor of kerosene in the room. Mrs.

Armstrong sat down without trying to rekindle the lamp.

Perhaps she was waiting for her companion to speak, but Billy kept silent.

"Well," said the elder woman at last, "I should think you might be interested enough to ask a question. But you don't care for anything but singing."

"What does the doctor say?" now inquired Billy.

"He says there's a good chance."

No response.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes; you told me there was a good chance."

Billy groped to the window and sat down in the chair standing there.

"I think he's been very kind to us."

In saying this Mrs. Armstrong's voice broke, and she began to sob unrestrainedly.

"Miny," she said, at last.

"Yes, mother."

"I didn't use to think you were so hard-hearted."

"Didn't you?"

"No; I don't seem to know much about you nowadays. I s'pose you'd cry hard enough if that dog of yours was hurt, wouldn't you?"

"I'm sorry," said Billy, speaking with extreme deliberation, "that I don't cry, since you seem to want me to cry."

Mrs. Armstrong had by this time succeeded in drawing her handkerchief from somewhere in her clothing.

"I s'pose it's natural for me to feel it more 'n you," she remarked. "You know I told you he used to pay attention to me. You remember I told you that?"

"I remember."

"I've been sure for some weeks back that he was thinkin' of the same thing again. Men don't forgit 's some folks seem to think they do. I don't know 's 'twould be strange if he should fall into old habits again. You don't think 'twould be strange, do you, Miny?"

Miny did not reply; and the next moment she began to laugh.

XIX

MERELY A VOICE

MRS. ARMSTRONG rose from her chair. It was dark and she stumbled, but recovered herself.

"Wilhelminy," she said, "you don't seem to be my child any more; I d' know what to make of you."

The girl had risen also, and she now had her arms about her mother's neck. She had stopped laughing as suddenly as she began.

"Don't try to make anything of me," she responded. "I didn't mean to laugh; I'm tired."

"There — there," the mother fondly stroked the girl's head. "We're all tired 'n' excited. 'Twas foolish of me to mention such a thing, 'n' he lyin' there as he is. But, what if he should get well—do you s'pose—do you feel 's if 'twould be suitable? Of course we ain't young folks any more; I'm three years older 'n he is, anyway. Should you call it suitable?"

"Don't ask me; that isn't for me to decide."

"But of course I should consult you; of course I should. We needn't talk about it any more now, though; 'tain't seemly, I know, and him lyin' there 's he is. I must go down now; p'r'aps there's something for me to do. The doctor said he should stay all night; and Mr. Hildreth 's goin' to lie on the lounge, so 's to be ready if he's needed. We've got him into that spare bedroom that leads out of the settin'-room; we put him there, for it was no use thinkin' of carryin' him up-stairs; and it 'll be real handy takin' care of him there—no stairs to run up 'n' down. He's consid'rable bad off?"

"Is he?"

"Yes, and mebbe internal injuries; doctor couldn't tell for certain to-night. I'll go down now. I'll keep the fire goin' and have things ready."

Mrs. Armstrong went down-stairs, and presently Billy followed her.

Then began that piteous change which illness makes in a household. Everything seemed different. The people crept about, shutting doors softly behind them, speaking in different tones. Hildreth was burdened with the care of everything out-of-doors, and planting-time coming soon. He hired the men Meloon had been accustomed to hiring. The days grew warmer; sometimes Meloon asked to have his window left open and his bed moved so that he could smell the air. His gaunt, white face would lie still for hours on the pillow as he gazed out into the world. The birds seemed as if they would break their little hearts with the sweetness of their own melody.

One day Meloon suddenly exclaimed:

"But why isn't she singing?" He slowly extended his hand towards the bell which stood on the table near. In answer to the summons, Mrs. Armstrong came in, her sleeves rolled up, her hands floury, her gentle face full of solicitude.

"Where's Billy?"

"She's in the milk-room, churning. Do you want her?"

"Yes."

"But if the butter 's most come, mebbe it 'll go back."

"Let it go back, then."

Mrs. Armstrong hurried away, and presently her daughter entered; her sleeves also were rolled up, and there was an air of haste and preoccupation about her.

She came to the side of the bed and said: "Good-morning, Mr. Meloon. Mother sent me in here."

"I know. It's three days since you were here, and I sent for you then. What do you mean by such behavior? Aren't you commanded to visit the sick and the afflicted?"

Billy smiled, but she made no attempt at an answer. Meloon's eyes were on her face.

"You look worn," he remarked, abruptly.

"I'm perfectly well; I'm working a good deal, but that doesn't hurt me; I love to work."

"Have you stopped singing—practising, I mean?"

"Oh no"—as if he had asked if she had stopped breathing.

"But I never hear you."

"I go to the nest barn, and I shut the door that opens this way; and if the wind blows towards the house I don't sing."

"Why do you do all that?"

"I don't wish to disturb you."

Meloon closed his eyes as if the action might assist him to prevent the utterance of some forcible word.

He had now been lying on this bed for more than a week. A young man from the village came over every day to sit with him and wait upon him. Sometimes the young man had a very unhappy time, and felt that he should choke to death if he could not reply to the furious words that were hurled at him.

But Meloon was sure to repent within the hour, and then the young man forgave him. These processes of sin and repentance relieved the deadly tedium somewhat.

"I suppose it's nearly time for Ruggles?" he asked, suddenly.

"In half an hour," was the reply.

Meloon opened his eyes quickly.

"Oh, in half an hour one may say a great deal. I've been thinking, Billy, and after I've thought a while I always do something. What I'm going to do now is to lend you money enough to pay Miss Runciman. I know how that debt eats into your soul. It won't gall you so much if you owe me. Now, don't speak; this is business. I'm getting four per cent. interest on my money in the bank; I'm going to charge you five. You can't refuse me. If I were well and on my feet you might call on your silly pride, but you won't thwart a poor fellow that's come to grief as I have. Besides, I have an eye to the main chance; I want higher interest; and I'm an old friend of your mother's. You're such a confoundedly proud little thing that you're ridiculous. Do I hear Ruggles's horse coming down the lane? Say, 'Mr. Meloon, I'll borrow your money, and thank you kindly.' Hurry; that *is* Ruggles."

"No, Mr. Meloon, and thank you kindly. Good-morning, Mr. Ruggles."

She turned back towards the man on the bed. She softened her voice as she continued, quickly:

"I might as well owe one person as another; but you're so kind."

Then she left the room and returned to her butter-making. Her mother came to ask what Mr. Meloon had wanted. The girl looked at her intently and strangely for an instant, forgetting to make any reply to her question. In the next moment, however, she related everything that had been said.

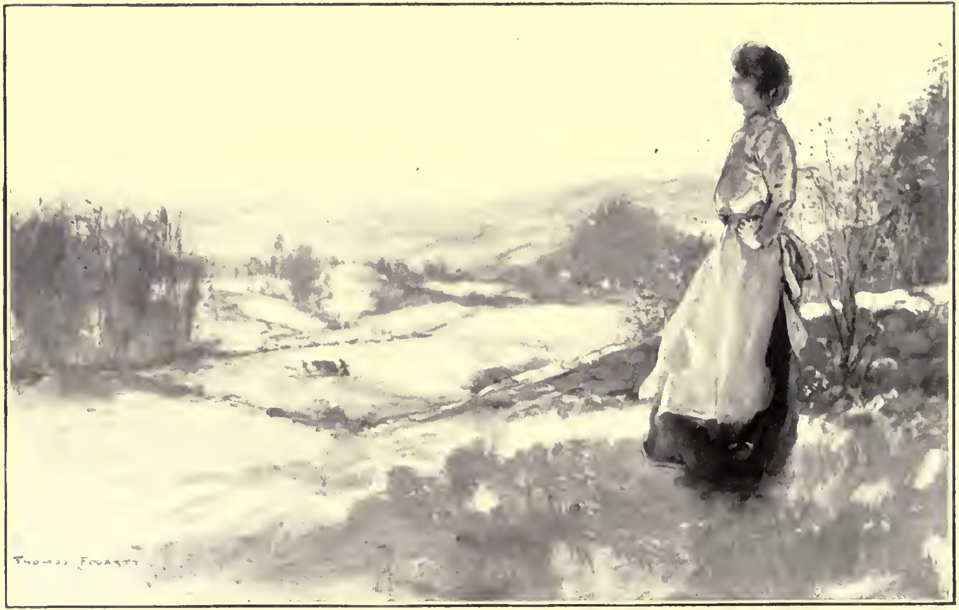
"That's just like him," exclaimed Mrs. Armstrong; "and he's doing it for my sake; you see he mentioned me. No, men ain't so fickle as folks call 'em, and I've no idea he cared for that wife of his. I expect he's been faithful all this time, and I'd forgotten him; I really had. You may be sure he had an object in writing to me when he heard your father was dead, Miny."

"All the same, I don't think I'll take his money; I'll pay Miss Runciman some day."

When she had worked over the butter for the first time Billy left the house. She went to the top of the hill in the south lot and looked over the farm, shading her eyes with her hand, her eyes contracting in the strong light of the May sun. She was looking for Hildreth, and when she saw him in the ploughed land at the north she began to walk towards him, striding along over the rough ground more like a man than like a woman.

Hildreth saw her coming. He was holding the plough behind a pair of oxen which one of the men was driving. He was stouter, he was brown; his hands were large and rough; he wore a full beard, which was not closely trimmed. You would hardly have guessed that this was the man who had been such a fascinating tenor-lover on the opera-stage. Sometimes when he looked in the glass, or at his hands, the young man swore. Then he would smile and think: "Well, it's all for her. So long as she stays I can stay, and no hardship, either—and, at the most, release is near."

Now he left the team and the plough to the other


Thomas Fogarty

"SHE WENT TO THE TOP OF THE HILL"

man and came leaping over the furrows towards Billy. She came forward and took his hand, leading him. She did not know that she had taken his hand; she only knew the one idea that possessed her. When they reached the grass-land she dropped the hand, but she took hold of the fold of the jumper he wore. He was staring at her, not daring to put a question as yet.

"I'm going away," she said.

"What?"

"Oh, don't stand there and say 'What?' Tell me that you're sure—sure that I can sing as well as when we sang together that time."

"You can sing better."

"Do you know it? Are you positive beyond a shadow of doubt?"

"I'm positive. Why, you know it yourself."

"I? I know nothing. But you must tell me; and if you're not right, if you're mistaken, if I fail again, I will kill myself."

She paused, breathless; then she laughed.

"Why don't you ask me if I'm rehearsing? I hate melodrama in real life. I hate any appearance of emotion; a person should be cold and hard, like a rock—I like a rock; I like it when it bruises one's flesh."

"Billy!"

"Oh, you needn't worry. I suddenly felt that I wouldn't stay here another day; but I wanted to ask you again, on your honor, if you think I can be a *prima donna*. You're a good judge. You know."

"Yes, you can."

"Very well; that's all. It was foolish enough for me to come out here for that, wasn't it? You heard me sing yesterday?"

"Yes. Billy, what are you going to do?"

"I told you. I'm going away. No matter where. If I were a Romanist I'd say I was going into retreat. But I'm not. I want to be by myself; and I shall cultivate my voice. I shall be ready when fall comes. I'm deadly tired of this farm-work. I'm strong as a young heifer now, thanks to my life here. You must take me to the station for the afternoon train—"

"But, Billy—"

"I tell you not to say 'But, Billy!' It rasps on me to have you speak like that."

"Very well; but I'm bound to know where you go. Will your mother be with you?"

"Mother? No; she must stay here; Mr. Meloon needs some one. I'm going by myself. It's no matter where; but you may be sure of one thing: I'll take the best kind of care of myself—I'm a voice, I'm not a woman. You wait; you'll hear from me; and you may make any arrangements for the autumn that seem good to you. I'll be ready. If I send anything here to you, it 'll always be forwarded, will it? I must know how to communicate with you. That's all; only you must take me to the station; we must start at four, for I wouldn't miss the train for a thousand worlds."

Having said this, the girl turned and ran as well as she could over the newly turned furrows. Hildreth started to follow her, but perhaps she divined his intention, for she paused and imperatively motioned him back. He stood an instant as if he would disobey, but he obeyed.

XX

GOING AWAY

BILLY ran to her own room as straight as a bird flies. Once there, she did not pause to take breath, but began taking down her few belongings from the closet and throwing them on the bed. Then she pulled her trunk out and flung up the lid. In doing this she disclosed piles of sheet-music which she had pored over in Paris. She took up these sheets one by one, her face changing as she glanced over the notes.

Presently she heard footsteps on the stairs. She held her head up defiantly as her mother entered.

"I didn't know but you left the Dutch cheese for me to make and—but, land alive! what you up to?" staring.

"I'm getting ready to go away; I'm going away this afternoon," hardily.

Mrs. Armstrong sat down and began to roll her apron up over her hands.

"But I can't git ready so soon," helplessly.

"You need not; I'm going alone."

"Wilhelminy!"

The girl's eyes were as unfeeling as steel as they met her mother's gaze.

"Yes; I've thought it all out within the last few minutes. I'm tired of this. I'd be mad if I kept on in it, though I did think I'd stay till fall. But I can't.

My voice has come back. Some women live for a husband or a child, or something of that sort; I live for my voice. I intend to get as much happiness out of life as the average—more. I must be ready to start by four this afternoon. When I get somewhere I'll write to you."

Mrs. Armstrong's frightened face began to quiver, but she restrained the tears.

"Somewhere!" she cried. "But I've got to know where. You tell me where, or I'll go with you, whether you want me or not."

As she spoke the woman looked something like a belligerent canary.

"I can't be hampered," said Billy.

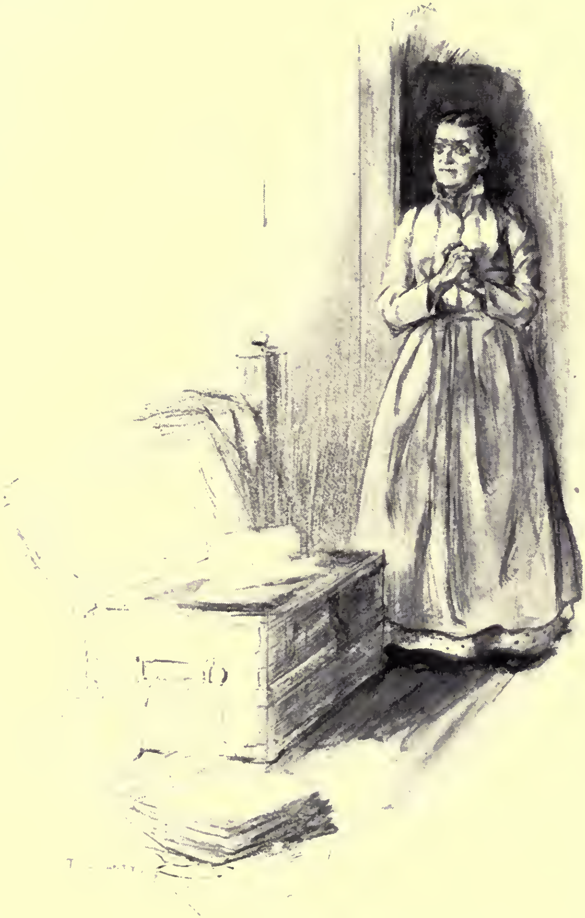
"Hampered!"

The girl was now piling up the sheet-music on the floor beside the trunk.

"I always do exactly as you tell me; you know I do," added Mrs. Armstrong. There was no reply to this. Billy began folding a gown. Presently she turned towards her mother.

"I've been trying to decide. I think I'll stop at one of those towns near Boston. I can go to the city then and consult musical people, if I want to—but I don't think I shall want to. I've got a little money—I've saved every cent I've earned here to help pay Miss Runciman. No matter; she can wait. I'll take one room and get my own meals. It won't be long until fall comes, and I shall be ready. Oh, you may be sure that I shall be ready! Thank fortune! this is a country where a girl can do pretty much as she pleases. I'll write you the moment I'm settled. If you worry, it 'll be your own fault. That's my plan."

She took up another gown and began folding it.



"'LAND ALIVE! WHAT ARE YOU UP TO?'"

Her mother gazed wistfully at her, her face working piteously.

"I should think you'd *want* me with you, Miny," she said.

And now she began to cry.

The girl looked at her with a kind of cold impatience. At last she said:

"I don't think you ought to leave here now; Mr. Meloon needs you. If I were a boy I don't suppose any one would think that you must be with me."

"But you ain't a boy."

Billy frowned; she did not speak until she could say, lightly:

"Reasoning was never your strong point, mother."

It was so evident that nothing she could say would have any effect that Mrs. Armstrong now gave herself up to unrestrained weeping. After a moment, however, she stopped to ask, brokenly, if Mr. Hildreth knew where she was going.

"No."

After this reply, another silence. Billy went on packing. She was not crying; her features were set steadily; her hands moved deftly.

Mrs. Armstrong rose.

"I shouldn't want to go anywhere without you," she said, tremulously. "I don't understand."

"The case is simply this: you're needed here, since Mr. Meloon met with this accident. As for me, I can't stand this humdrum, dead-and-alive way any longer. I can't stand it, and I won't."

Mrs. Armstrong did not try to speak again. She left the room. She hoped that her daughter would call her back; so she went very slowly down the stairs. But she was not called. She could not understand. She sat down on the last step and leaned her elbows on her knees, sobbing into her apron.

It had been bad enough in Paris, but Miny had never been in the least like this. It was dreadful to have a girl who wanted to be a *prima donna*. It seemed to take all natural feeling out of her. But Miny had never been like this—no, never!

Plainly she was not to be called. She had thought her child had a tender heart. She couldn't leave her in this way; she would go back up the stairs.

Mrs. Armstrong had gone a few steps when young Ruggles opened the door below.

"You there, Mis' Armstrong?" he called. "Mr. Meloon wants you."

The woman descended again, and obeyed the summons, not daring to stop to bathe her face. As she hurried through the kitchen an illuminating flash of explanation came to her. Miny must have quarrelled with Mr. Hildreth; yes, that would make things clear, for Mrs. Armstrong had never yet divested her mind of the belief that her daughter, having once thought that she loved Hildreth well enough to marry him clandestinely, still cherished that affection somewhere in her heart, whether she acknowledged it to herself or not. Such devotion as Hildreth's always won a woman sooner or later. And there was a romantic fitness about such an end, too, which no woman could fail to see.

"So you've been crying," said Meloon, abruptly, when she came to his bedside.

She nodded. She was not crying now, but her face was red and swollen.

Ruggles had been requested to remain away for a few moments.

"I suppose it is useless to ask a woman why she cries; I always believed that women enjoyed being miserable; still, Serissa, what have you been crying about?"

"Miny has just told me she can't stand it here any longer."

Mr. Meloon reached up to the place where his handkerchief lay. He passed a fold of it carefully across his mouth, then replaced the handkerchief.

"Well?" he said, in calm interrogation.

"She's goin' away this afternoon."

"So soon as that? But we must remember, Serissa, that she has borne it here a good while."

"Borne it? What should we have done if it hadn't been for you, I'd like to know?"

"Pshaw!"

Mrs. Armstrong seemed to expect that he was going to say something more, but he remained silent, and she remarked that she hadn't a grain of doubt that it was somehow on account of Mr. Hildreth.

"I do believe that she is still in love with him."

"Still?—she has been in love with him, then?"

"Yes."

Meloon raised himself a trifle in the bed. He moved his head restlessly two or three times, then he fixed his eyes on the face by his bedside. These eyes were so keen and strong that they made a great contrast to his hollow, white face.

It seemed a long time before he spoke, and then he said:

"And quite natural, too."

"That's just what I think."

"But why should she go away?" he asked. "Or perhaps they have gone together?"

He raised his voice to a high, harsh tone. It almost seemed as if he would get up from the bed.

"No; I guess they don't mean that. I'm sure she's going alone. You can't tell much what a girl who is in love will do, 'specially if she's a singer also."

"You're right, Serissa, you're right. To be a woman, to be in love, and to have the artistic temperament—" Meloon began to laugh. "It would take God himself to predict what a human being would do under those circumstances, wouldn't it?"

He continued to laugh with such apparent amusement that his companion could only stare at him. She had never understood Meloon in the old days, and he puzzled her now more than ever.

"I suppose they were in love that night when I heard them singing at each other on the stage in New York," he said, at last.

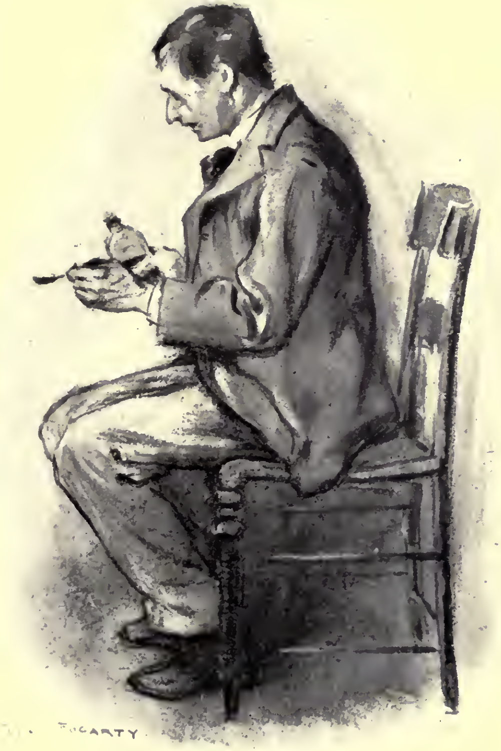
"Oh yes, I suppose so."

Mrs. Armstrong was longing to relate the whole story, but she had never yet told it. It had come to seem a kind of dream to her now. Perhaps it was what Meloon called the artistic temperament that made her daughter so different from the girls of her age at home. The mother was proud of her, but she sighed all the same. She had hoped all these freaks would cease; but now Miny could sing again—

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Armstrong, aloud. Then she hastened to ask:

"Did you want me? The young man said you wanted me."

"Oh yes—so I did. I sent for you. But I think I've forgotten what it was. You may go now. Awfully kind of you to stay here, Serissa. I know I'm about as bad as a chained tiger in these days. You may go now."



RUGGLES

She walked towards the door.

"See here," he called. "Keep that Ruggles from coming in at present; it won't be safe for him to come now. Tell him I feel like having a long nap."

Mrs. Armstrong hurried out, and carefully latched the door behind her.

Meloon, left alone, seemed immediately to carry out his declared intention of going to sleep. He closed his eyes and kept them thus. One sinewy hand lay outside the coverlet; the fingers were, perhaps, shut too tightly for slumber, but nothing moved save heart and lungs as they mechanically performed their work. This silence and immobility continued long, and at last seemed to create a kind of eerie atmosphere in the room. What was it that at last made Trooper, who was stretched on a rug at the other side of the bed, move uneasily? He lifted his head, and his black nostrils worked as he silently sniffed. Then he slowly raised his enormous, tawny bulk and walked around the bed that he might be nearer where his master usually lay. He put his muzzle on the end of the pillow, resting it there a moment. No notice was taken of him, and he pressed his head still farther along, making a slight, pleading noise under his breath, and swinging his tail slowly and interrogatively. Still he received no response. His tail swung more rapidly; he whined audibly.

Meloon opened his eyes and turned his head. He extended his hand and took hold of the dog's ear. The man at this moment looked so haggard, so pallid, and so old that he seemed almost twice his real age. He did not smile, and it was a moment before he spoke.

"It's you and I, isn't it, Trooper? Just you and I. And we've known it all along."

The dog wagged now so hard that the bed shook. He lifted himself and put his two huge front paws on the side, reaching over and hurriedly licking his master's face.

"Why, old fellow, you want me to be sure you love me, don't you? Sure of it—oh yes, I'm sure of it—there—there. I hope you'll live as long as I do. We're just a man and his dog, aren't we? An old man and his dog, eh? Hush! Be gentle—there—lie down there, if you want to."

Overjoyed at this permission, Trooper scrambled up beside his master and stretched himself alongside, his yellow head with its black mask on the pillow, his tail beating the bed.

Meloon moved a little so that he could place one arm partially over the dog's neck. Presently Trooper fell asleep and snored. Meloon again closed his eyes, and now no tremor of the lids betrayed that he also was not sleeping.

XXI

A ROOM IN ROXBURY

MELOON did not see Billy again before she departed. At her mother's earnest request she sent in to say that she was going, and would say good-bye.

Mrs. Armstrong said that it was outrageous for Miny to go away and not speak a word to one who had been so kind. Ruggles, the attendant, came out to say that Mr. Meloon seemed to be resting, and he had asked Miss Armstrong to excuse him; he hated good-byes, anyway.

Billy flushed as she received this message. She kissed her mother and went to the carriage. Hildreth stood at the horse's head. This horse was the mate of the colt that had been injured, and that was now hobbling about in a paddock, or resting in a loose box. She would never be good for anything again, everybody said, and any man but Rawdon would have killed her.

"Knock me in the head rather than her," Meloon had replied to this suggestion.

When the colt had trotted away in the open wagon with Billy and Hildreth on the one seat, and Billy's trunk in behind, Meloon called peremptorily to Ruggles to help him to sit up, and to bring him writing-paper and a pen.

"Now leave the room."

Ruggles left the room.

Meloon began to write.

"You're such a rash little girl, Billy, that it remains for older people to have an eye to you. I know just how much money you have—what you've earned here in the last few months. I want you to have more. I send a check for one hundred dollars in this. I send it because I shall feel easier about you if you have it. You needn't use it unless you are obliged, and you may return it when you get more. If you send it back now I shall never forgive you, and shall think that you haven't the grace to accept a favor. You know it's easy enough to grant a favor—it's the taking that tells what a person's nature is. Now, Billy, don't disappoint me."

Then Meloon called for his check-book, and a few moments later Ruggles was riding after the colt and the light wagon.

"Don't you dare to come back here unless you overtake them," he said.

Billy was silent. She was also gloomy. She was experiencing the reaction that so often comes after one has acted upon an impulse. Not that she thought of retreating. She had her plans definitely formed.

The colt was walking up a hill. Hildreth, of necessity, was also silent, since his companion did not speak and did not appear to hear him when he spoke.

They heard a horse galloping behind them. Billy turned and saw it was Ruggles.

"Something has happened!" she exclaimed, and put out her hand to the reins. Ruggles was waving the letter in his hand. Hildreth was muttering an expletive.

"It's for you," said Ruggles; and turned his horse to gallop back.

Billy tore open the envelope. Her eyes ran down the lines. She covered the check within the palm of her hand. Suddenly and inexplicably she felt that she could not go on. All her resolution oozed out of her.

"I'm going back!" she announced.

"What, now? Then something *has* happened?"

"Nothing; but I must see Mr. Meloon again."

"If we don't go on now we sha'n't catch that train," with still greater wonder.

"No matter; we won't catch it, then."

Billy set her lips together.

"Heaven knows I don't want you to go on!" exclaimed Hildreth, and he turned the horse.

"Have you forgotten something?" asked Mrs. Armstrong, rushing out as they drove up.

"Yes," said Billy; "but don't ask me now, please."

She had jumped from the carriage. She walked by her mother, going straight to the sitting-room. Young Ruggles came forward on tiptoe, with his hand raised.

"Hush!" he whispered. "He's asleep."

"I'm not asleep either," from the bedroom; "let her come in. But she'll lose that train."

The girl walked on, obeying that voice. Afterwards, in thinking of that moment, she could not tell what she had intended to say; she only knew that it all came out differently from what she had meant.

"Yes," she said, "I know I shall lose the train."

She came close to the bed and extended her hand. Meloon put out his own hand and just touched her fingers; then his hand dropped. For some reason she immediately flushed deeply.

With an impulsive movement the man now reached forward and took both her hands in a close clasp.

"I couldn't go without seeing you again, after all," she began, hurriedly, "when I read your note—and that money—"

"Billy, are you going to hurt me by bringing that back?"

"No—no—I'm going to keep it. I'm going to keep that bit of paper forever"—here a passionate intensity came to her tone, her eyes filled. She went on rapidly—"as a kind of keepsake, you know—as if I should ever forget your kindness to mother and me!—you'll think I'm just an emotional, silly kind of a girl—and so I am. But I want you to understand that I know how good you've been to us; I know—"

"You certainly are a silly kind of girl to magnify things in this way. You've worked for me and I've paid you. Now I loan you a little money on good interest—"

Meloon spoke in a matter-of-fact tone.

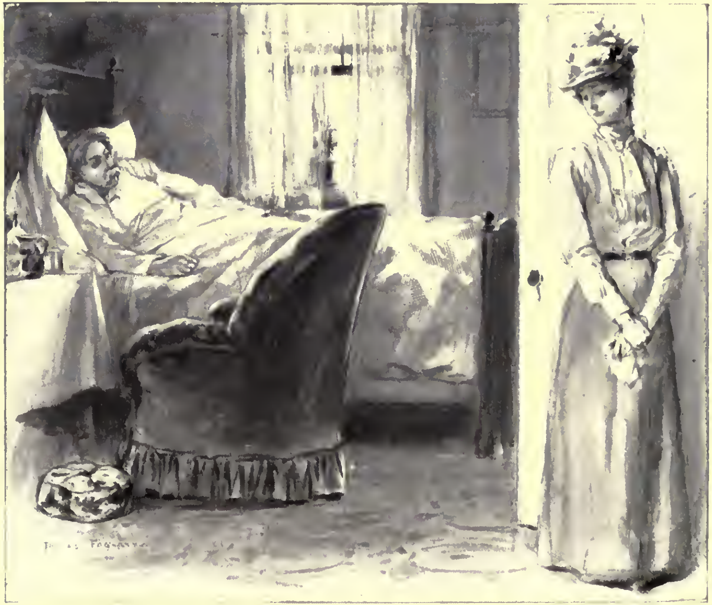
"It isn't that," interrupted Billy, "it's—it's your kindness—something I can't describe. I suppose that's the way you are to poor creatures who haven't any homes. One thing I came back to say is that I don't think I shall go now, after all."

Having made this announcement, Billy certainly expected a cordial assent, and was sufficiently surprised when, after a moment's pause, Meloon said:

"You are mistaken in that—I'm sure you're mistaken in that."

She could not speak. Though he was so kind, and had made them both so welcome, he was glad to have her go then. She began to stiffen, while her heart burned within her.

"You won't be contented here now," he went on; "I don't mean by that that you were contented be-



"'BILLY, ARE YOU GOING TO HURT ME BY BRINGING THAT BACK?'"

fore, but you were resigned, Billy; you would do better to go."

"Very well," she responded. "I can't go now until to-morrow."

She was pale, but she spoke very quietly.

"I hope you don't think I shall not miss you."

She had gone a few steps towards the door. She paused long enough to say:

"I'm sure your advice is best, Mr. Meloon. I will try it again to-morrow. It always makes one a little ridiculous to come back after one has started; it's like stepping into a wrong place."

"You don't understand," returned Meloon; "and I suppose you never will."

"It's of no consequence," said Billy. "Good-bye—as I probably shall not see you again."

"Good-bye."

She left the room, and the door closed behind her.

Meloon lay watching the door for many moments. Then he moved slightly, and said, below his breath:

"I'm glad she's going. If I could help it I wouldn't have her in the house another day—not another day."

Having spoken thus to himself, Meloon soon called to Ruggles, and commissioned him to inform Miss Armstrong that if she wished to leave her dog until later he should be cared for. The answer came that Lotos would go with her, and thank Mr. Meloon.

Billy thought that all her life she should remember the stinging sense of humiliation she felt the rest of that long spring afternoon and the hours of the next day. She carefully avoided Hildreth. She helped her mother with strenuous eagerness; she did not sleep at all during the night, and at last the time came for her to go again. She had been acting in an absurd and ridiculous manner.

She wished to lash the horse to make him take her faster away from the Meloon farm. Instead, however, she sat sedately by Hildreth's side and looked off vaguely over the country of hills and dales. Everywhere was the confident green of the spring; everywhere the birds were up in the blue sky or flying joyously down to unseen nests among the trees.

When Hildreth spoke his voice sounded far away, and she was obliged to rouse herself to listen. At the station she saw him and the agent come out, and the latter fastened a check to her trunk. It seemed to her a scene on the stage, and this notion was strengthened when she heard the roar of the coming train, and Hildreth, standing close to her and gazing at her in a strained fashion, seized her hand and kissed it repeatedly. Billy, glancing over his shoulder, saw the station-agent looking at them intently. She knew what he would tell his wife, and what his wife would tell everybody else, and she began to laugh. Hildreth started back.

"Do forgive me," she said; "I didn't sleep last night; I'm nervous. I was thinking what that man would say about us. Here's the train; please take my bag; I want to get Lotos in myself. Good-bye —until the fall. Yes, I'll be sure to write."

She and Lotos stood on the platform of the car as the train went on, she holding the dog's collar. She was not looking at Hildreth; she was looking beyond him to the hills where stood the farm-house that had sheltered her. She could not see it, however. Presently she took her seat, and the conductor came and promptly proposed to put the dog in the baggage-car. To Billy in her present state of mind this seemed too much, and she went with the dog and sat uncomfortably on a trunk for long hours, with Lotos on the floor by her.

Once during the journey she roused herself to consider what the journey's end would be; she bought a Boston daily paper and studied advertisements of rooms to let. She found one far out at the South End—a room, up three flights, which could be had, without meals, for $3.50 per week.

Arriving, she took a cab and went there, to find that the landlady had a constitutional fear of dogs, particularly of smooth-haired, grizzled ones. It seemed that her first husband had been bitten in the leg by a smooth-haired, grizzled dog.

"Did he die?" asked Billy.

"Yes, in time."

"I mean did the dog's bite kill him?"

"Oh no; he died of consumption ten years after. But it might have killed him, you know. I couldn't think of taking him"—referring now to Lotos; "I could accommodate you first-rate; and I think I'd take you, though you have no references. I always ask and give references. You must excuse me," rising and going towards the door; "I smell something burning; I've got a new cook, and she burns everything. Good-evening; I'm sure I hope you will find a place. Yes, that meat is burned to a cinder."

So Billy and Lotos took the cab again.

When the man shut the door he naturally asked, "Where to?" and Billy couldn't tell. Moved by a sudden impulse, she inquired:

"Do you know where they'll take me and my dog? They don't seem to want dogs."

"My wife'll let you a room," was the answer; "she lets rooms. We've got a pup ourselves—we 'ain't got nothin' aginst dogs. We live in Roxbury. Shall I take ye there?"

"Oh yes," thankfully.

And that was why the girl went to Roxbury and lived in a little wooden house with three feet of land on each side of it, and a small backyard where Lotos was understood to exercise himself, but where he really fought flies in his daily attempts to sleep, while his mistress was singing in her room.

The place was on a side street, where junk-carts and scissors-grinders seemed to be passing most of the time. It was a locality also where there was a great deal of digging in the street, and of sewer-gas escaping; men in greasy overalls, with pipes in their mouths and picks in their hands—altogether a contrast to the farm from which Billy had come. Her landlady appeared not to mind the sights or the stenches; she was kind and curious. It was to curiosity that Billy laid the fact that Mrs. Knox frequently lurked on the dark stairs to hear the singing in her lodger's room. She said it was like some singing she had once heard in a side-show of a circus. Did Billy, perhaps, belong to a side-show?

The girl laughed, but she cried afterwards. Somehow her life had descended. Only once in a while, when she was singing, did she feel the glow and exaltation which were familiar to her. But her voice increased in power and volume.

XXII

A STREET SCENE

SHE had not sent word to her mother.

"To-morrow I will write," she said to herself; but she did not. When to-morrow came something invincible seemed to hold her from walking to the corner where was the mail-box, and dropping in the note she had written—for she wrote—she had written many times. She knew how wicked this was; at last it began to be a kind of obsession, or she fancied that it was. At the end of a fortnight she had almost given up trying to post the letters that had accumulated; and she thought less and less of her mother's anxiety; as for Hildreth—well, though she had promised to write to them both, she suddenly remembered that she had not promised to write immediately. Some time she would send them word. Meanwhile she studied and practised. She took long walks with Lotos through uninteresting streets that finally reached the country; but it wasn't the real, free, open country—it was either squalid, or it was fine with villas from whose grounds glittering carriages rolled. She didn't know which she hated more—the squalor or the grandeur. All the time she was possessed by the fancy that she had cut herself off forever from her old life, from everything but the singing part of it; and that the wound thus made was bleeding. She knew that this was a fancy, but she could not put it away from her. She conversed much with her dog in these days. She sat down by the way-side under the trees; she thought of the time when she was to sing, of how she had made butter on the farm, and the fresh odor of the yellow stuff mingled with the scent of clover and daisies. It was June now; she had left the farm three weeks ago—it might as well have been three years.

One day she was sitting under some trees in the most country-like part of Brookline. There was a stream of carriages and bicycles going by. A man wheeled slowly down the road, glanced up at her as she sat there, and presently returned. He dismounted and came towards her, hat in hand. He had a long face with a tiny mustache waxed carefully and drawn up from his lips so that his prominent yellow-white teeth appeared still more prominent. His head was bald on top and shone in the brilliant sun. He was past middle age, but he was still slender and was dressed in the nattiest of wheeling suits.

Lotos watched his approach, muttering suspiciously, but the stranger did not notice the dog.

"I hope you'll pardon me," he said to Billy, "but I never forget a face. I saw you in New York."

The girl made no reply; she looked at him expectantly.

"I saw you with Leonora Runciman," he continued. "I heard you sing. I can't be mistaken."

"No," she said, "you're not mistaken."

He continued standing before her with his hat still in his hand; the dog had ceased growling and was apparently listening to the conversation.

The man seemed in no haste to speak again; he was contemplating Billy with close, but perfectly respectful, attention.

"I saw you afterwards," he resumed at last. "In fact, I was at Milan, and was at the theatre that night when your voice failed."

The girl blanched somewhat as she heard these words; but she braced herself directly, and waited in silence. Her interest was beginning to be acute.

"It was a magnificent voice," he said, with unction; "you might have conquered the world. I tried every way to find you. I went to Marchesi, but either she could not or would not give me any information. Curious that when I had given up all thought of the matter I should see you by the roadside here in Massachusetts."

He now replaced his hat and again indulged in a short silence, during which he smoothed upward his tiny mustache, still keeping his gaze upon the girl. But she could not help thinking that he studied her as a singing-machine rather than as a woman.

"I wonder if you ever heard of me," he said at last; "my name is Boldrea—Emanuel Boldrea."

Billy started to her feet.

"Oh yes!" she said, and her eyes sparkled.

He smiled. "Now you know why I wanted to find you. You see, I was afraid that you would despair, and would not try to recover your voice; and I believed that you need not despair. Miss Runciman knew where you were; but she is now very religious"—he smiled again—"and she would tell me nothing. She said that she would do nothing to lessen your chance of heaven"—here the speaker shrugged his shoulders. "She even went so far as to call me a Mephistopheles. You don't consider me a Mephistopheles, do you, Miss Armstrong, when I tempt you to try to sing again? I will not charge you a penny. I want the glory of putting you back on the stage."

Notwithstanding this man's foreign mustache and his foreign name, he had quite an American way of talking; and later Billy found that he was an Englishman, with an Italian mother, and had chosen a name for himself.

"I am going back to the stage this fall," answered Billy, "thanks to your method."

"Ah! ah! I congratulate you—I congratulate myself."

He stepped forward and took her hand, bowing over it impressively, although Lotos bristled and growled again.

"Will you permit me to hear you sing?"

Billy appointed the next morning, and gave Boldrea her address. She saw him wheel smoothly away, and as she watched him she thought that here was another means brought to her hand to enable her to cut herself away from the old life. She had not planned to cut herself away; but the power was put into her hand, as if fate were pushing her. She liked to argue in this way, as we all do in support of our inclination or our freaks.

When she was in her hot little room at Mrs. Knox's, Billy wrote another note to her mother; there was a curious satisfaction in doing this, though by this time she knew very well that she would not send the note. She felt cold and hard towards the past. In these days she used to examine her face in the glass to see if she had changed outwardly as much as inwardly. She was growing thin; she did not care to eat much; but she took milk and meat, careful to select food to strengthen her. She studied her physical needs with the utmost care; she kept out-of-doors a great deal; she neglected nothing that should further her purpose.

Boldrea arrived at the precise moment of the appointment, and she sang for him, with her face burning and her hands cold. She sang whatever he suggested. He stood in the bit of a parlor and watched her and listened, his hands resting on the back of a chair. He had opened the door and windows.

"It is like singing in a box," he remarked.

He stood looking at her for some moments after she had stopped singing; then he abruptly asked if she would go to England; if she would be willing to make her *début* there instead of in America; in that case she might return with the prestige of a foreign success.

"It is not I who manage these things, however," he added. "But"—here he mentioned a well-known *impresario*—"is my friend, and he has not forgotten you. My wife and I return next week. Madame Boldrea will be happy to have you go with us. Is it arranged?"

"Let me think of it," said Billy, in a low voice.

The proposition tempted her immeasurably. She wished that she might go to another planet. She wished that she might throw off her own identity and become some one else. Perhaps she might become some one else. Was there no science that could work that transformation? If she could divest herself of that individuality which had thus far been hers, she could then cast away all her old duties and responsibilities. She would keep only her voice. She was tired of herself. This fancy, absurd as it was, became stronger as the hours went by. She was quite aware how absurd it was, but it had a great power.

She could, in a way, hide behind it. She might slough off the woman she had thus far been. Would that be any more strange than that the snake could writhe out of his old skin? And she would keep only her voice. There is a lurking devil in each one of us. Sometimes he never awakens save to peep out once or twice in a lifetime; sometimes he suddenly comes to a full life and takes possession. Then we say: "How that man has changed! He has always been such a good man until now;" or "How we have misunderstood that man!"

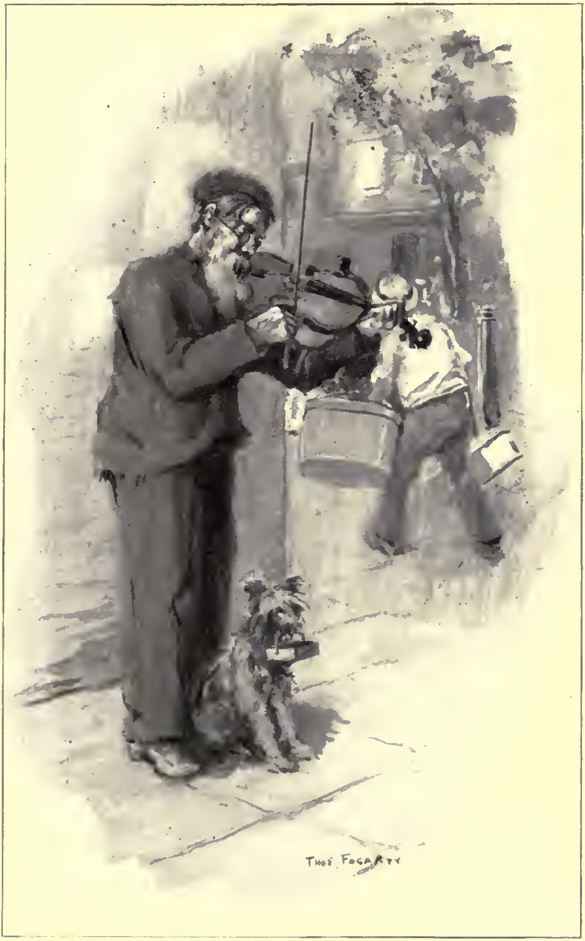
That devil was peeping out of Billy's eyes as she brushed her hair that night before her glass. And she saw him and welcomed him.

"I will go with the Boldreas," she said, aloud; and so she told that gentleman when he came the next day.

"I haven't money enough to take a first-class passage," she explained, "but I can cross in the same ship with you and madam. No, no! you needn't lend me anything—not yet. If I'm a success, all will be well; if I'm not—why, then, all will be well just the same. In three days, you say, the steamer starts. I'm ready."

Boldrea looked at the speaker narrowly. When he returned to the hotel he told his wife that there was something odd about that girl; she evidently had something on her mind; but she could sing like an angel and a woman, which was all that concerned them.

"Some love affair," responded madame, comfortably. She was a thick, fat woman, who spoke unctuously, and who looked upon life as a means whereby one was enabled to eat and drink good things. One often wonders what kind of a future life awaits such a person—not a spiritual life, surely—what then?


THOS. FOGARTY

THE FIDDLER ON THE CORNER

On the day but one before the steamer was to sail from the East Boston wharf, Boldrea brought his wife to call upon Miss Armstrong. Billy received them in the parlor, which could hardly hold the three of them. Madame expressed her pleasure at the prospect of the girl's company.

"But you won't have my company," said Billy, composedly; "I sha'n't be able to associate with the saloon passengers. I'm as poor as a rat — though rats always look plump to me," with a laugh. "I shall be obliged to borrow to get something to wear on the stage; but I'm going to pinch all I can."

Madame murmured something in her throat in response to this; and when she was on the street again she informed her husband that she didn't like the looks of that girl, and there would be sure to be some kind of trouble sooner or later with her.

"However," she ended, "I'm not going to worry about her."

Which was quite likely, as she never worried about anything that was not food.

"I'm glad I've caught her," was the response; "she'll be worth her weight in gold in opera; and if she has anything on her mind—why, she has a good chance of getting rid of it; and as for a love affair, young women are always in the midst of one."

Billy went out into the street with her callers and saw them get into their carriage. It was a very warm day. July had come in with great heat. The sewer-gas seemed rather stronger than usual in the street, although the trenches had been covered. A blind man was playing a fiddle on the corner near by. At his feet sat a very dirty and disreputable-looking white poodle, holding an open wooden box in his mouth. In this box were a few pennies. Billy walked to the corner and dropped a nickel into the box, although she knew very well that she needed the coin as much as the man could need it. The fiddle was squeaking away "Hear me, Norma." People were hurrying by, not listening at all.

Billy took her place just behind the man and began to sing the Italian words. The bow wavered and almost stopped, then went on again with fervor, the dark, grimy face of the player lighting up in that piteous way in which a blind face will lighten.

It was just a freak, an impulse which had prompted the girl, and for the moment she enjoyed what she was doing.

People began to gather; pennies and silver pieces clattered into the box; the poodle wagged his tail excitedly, but he kept his teeth firmly to their duty.

"It's awfully kind of her to help the man in that way," said a lady; "and oh, can't she sing!"

Farther along the street was another corner, and around this corner whirled a bicycle ridden by a girl. She whirled up without slackening her speed in the least, knocking over a child as she came. She dismounted so that she was behind Billy; she stepped up quickly and instantly joined in with the singing, her voice a dashing contralto, with the unmistakable quality of having been used on the stage.

Billy stopped and faced about. The other singer stopped also, and laughed aloud. Then she seized Billy by the shoulders and kissed her.

The people who had gathered looked on eagerly, and some applauded.

XXIII

BATHSHEBA AGAIN

"STREET scene — daylight — blind violinist and his dog — beautiful lady singing like — like what? Great Scott! Billy, what do you sing like now, do you think?"

The speaker slightly shook the shoulders she held.

As for Billy, she gasped before she could speak. Then she said, with tolerable calmness:

"Bashy? Is it really you, Bashy?"

"Certainly. And I should advise you, Billy Armstrong, if you are in hiding for a crime, or for any purpose whatsoever, not to sing in the street, or anywhere else where you can be heard, for that matter."

"Let us go away from here."

Billy glanced at the people who had gathered. "I thought I might get a few pennies for this man," she added.

Bashy opened the little purse attached to her belt; she tipped it up and poured the change into her hand and then into the dog's box.

The man had taken his fiddle from his shoulder and his hat from his head. He was speaking rapidly and brokenly.

Billy now began to hate the people who were watching. She pulled at Bashy's hand.

"Come," she said, "I can't stand this."

"Why," responded the other girl, "this is our audience. What!" as she lifted her wheel and walked beside it—"you are not staying around here?" She sniffed at the sewer-gas as she spoke.

Billy made no reply until they were in the parlor; then she relinquished her companion's hand and answered:

"I've been here for several weeks. I wish you wouldn't ask me any questions."

Bashy had placed her wheel in the hall; she gave it a final pat and left it. She made round eyes and a round mouth, and then exclaimed:

"Not ask you questions? Then you want me to die; for I shall simply die if I can't pour out interrogation points. I meet Billy Armstrong on a corner in Roxbury—don't they call this Roxbury?—I lost my way or I shouldn't have happened into this place. She is singing to a street-player's fiddle; a little dog is taking pennies for her. Enter contralto on her wheel—flings herself on long-lost friend. Then long-lost friend coolly tells her not to ask anything. Impossible, Billy."

While Bashy talked she looked curiously at her companion. Having become somewhat breathless, Bashy was silent for an instant. She glanced about the room.

"Are you living here?" she inquired.

"For a few weeks," concisely.

"You needn't think you can play that game on me; I'm going to know about you. Evidently your voice has come back. I saw in the papers that you had lost it. When I read that I said, 'Billy will be ready to kill herself.' I never saw anybody so in love with singing as you were. I tried to hear about you, but you seemed to have sunk into the earth.

And as for my brother Vane—Billy, what have you done with Vane? Have you eaten him and buried his bones? For months I've not known whether he was dead or alive. He never did write to me much, and lately not at all. I always did think you would marry him again."

"Bashy!"

"Well, why not? If you loved him well enough to do it once—though I know it was only a form, and was just horrid of him—why shouldn't you do it again now he is free?—that is, if he can stick to his fancy. He was just wild about the whole thing. I didn't know but that he would go and kill that wife of his—and who could have blamed him much if he had?"

Bashy's voice ceased, and she sat gazing intently at the girl who was seated opposite, and who met the gaze with a kind of blinding openness.

She leaned forward.

"Billy," she said, sharply, "where is Vane?"

"I think he is in a town in New Hampshire, about four hours' ride by rail from here."

She spoke as if she were mentioning the locality of some merchandise.

"How do you know?"

"Because I've been with him."

"You? Oh, Billy, have you married him again, then? You know you did love him. You can't deny that."

Bashy rose from her seat and went to the back of Billy's chair. Standing thus, she encircled the girl's neck with her arm.

"There seems to be a mystery about you now," she went on, "and I just dote on mysteries—until I've solved them. Why have you and Vane been in a New Hampshire town about four hours' ride by rail from Boston?"

Billy moved as if she would have taken the arm from her neck. Bathsheba Hildreth seemed coarser to her now; even her face had become less refined, and her lips had grown more full. She had an expression about the eyes as if she drank more wine than was good for her — and in the old days she had liked champagne too well.

"My mother and I have been at work on a farm," she answered, somewhat coldly, "and Mr. Hildreth found us there. He came to work also."

"What! Vane at work on a farm? Vane soiling his hands? Does he milk? Does he shovel manure? Ha! ha!"

Bashy laughed loudly. But she stopped suddenly, and added, with grave emphasis: "I told you he loved you. Can you resist devotion like that? Poor boy! He was handicapped from the time of that horrible marriage."

Billy said nothing. She sat rather rigidly beneath the embracing arm. She smelled cigarette smoke in Bashy's breath. A flood of memories of the time she had spent with Miss Runciman and her niece was sweeping over her mind. If it had not been for Miss Runciman she would, perhaps, have been a different girl; if she had never sung she would have been a different girl, surely.

"As for me," went on Bashy, "I shall never be anything, anyway. I've gone from bad to worse. I don't think they'll have me sing in anything much more. I've had to take up with horrid parts last season. My voice is about used up. You remember how I used to flat? Well, I can't keep to the pitch even as well as I used to; and there's something rusty and rough that I can't get rid of. Perhaps you noticed it when I was singing with you just now? Did you?"

"Yes," hesitatingly. Billy began to be sorry for Bashy, and her face softened. A little of that feeling of gay, reckless comradeship came to her.

"Oh, that is too bad!" cried Bashy—"too bad."

Her voice faltered in the last phrase.

She left Billy and walked across the bit of a room. She returned and stood with her face averted.

"But that isn't the worst of it. If I can't sing any more—that will be terrible; but I could at least keep my self-respect. I guess I'm a bad lot, Billy Armstrong. I wonder why seeing you should arouse my conscience! Arouse my conscience! Isn't that a fine phrase? Sounds as if I were a minister of the gospel, doesn't it?"

Billy tried to think what she ought to say, but nothing came to her. She felt a vague uneasiness; and something urged her to be kind to Bashy.

In the silence, the new-comer appeared to throw off this regret, if it were regret.

"Come," briskly; "tell me something about yourself. Here am I blabbing no end. What's in your face?—let me see, you little close-mouthed Yankee girl."

Bashy suddenly took Billy's face between her hands, and gazed at it steadily as if she were probing it for some secret.

As she removed her hands she said, positively:

"Don't try to deceive me; you do love Vane."

Billy would not reply; she smiled and kept silent. Her heart was beating fast.

She made an effort, and said, lightly:

"You still smoke, Bashy?"

"Oh yes; I couldn't live without my cigarettes. Oh," with sudden violence, "I wish I could get away from my life—get away—I don't care where. If you are going to be wicked, you want to have your conscience all seared over, so that you needn't have fits of remorse. What I want is a seared conscience."

"Are you really so wicked, Bashy, or are you merely talking?"

"I'm telling the truth."

Bashy sat down and drew off the loose leather glove from her left hand; she had previously removed the other glove. She held out her hand.

"That's a lovely diamond, isn't it?" she asked.

The stone flashed in the eyes looking at it.

"Yes, beautiful."

Billy bent over it, and extended her finger as if to touch the gem. But the hand was snatched away.

"It's not for the likes of you to touch it," exclaimed Bashy, and laughed. "You don't understand. Now I see you I'm almost ready to run away from everything."

Billy was really startled.

"Go with me," she said, impulsively. "I sail for England the day after to-morrow."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes, I mean it."

The other remained silent. She began to walk about the room again; sometimes she paused and looked searchingly at Billy.

"I shall be no end of a bore to you," she said, at last.

"It's more likely that I shall be a bore to you," was the response. "You see," with a hesitating frankness, "I'm not going to care anything more for a thing in this world except music. There's not a human being who shall have a thought of mine."

"What!" cried Bashy, "not your mother?"

Billy flinched visibly at this; then she seemed to harden.

"Mother has always disapproved of my singing; she doesn't understand it, and she thinks it's wicked. I have decided not to drag her into my evil ways again. She doesn't know where I am; she doesn't know that I'm going to England. I mean to begin now without a fetter. I mean to be nothing but a singer."

Bashy was contemplating the girl in amazement—for a moment she appeared to forget her own troubles.

"You're wrong there," she said, "you'll come to shipwreck."

Billy laughed.

"Yes, you will. Good heavens! what do you think I'd give if I had a mother. You're planning to be both a scamp and a fool. I wonder which is worse, you or I."

There was no response to this remark. Bashy went on, in still more excitement:

"Now I couldn't have planned to treat my mother like that. You're a curious girl, you are."

"But it 'll save her suffering in the end; I've thought it all out. She'd be worrying about me—she always was in Paris. By-and-by, when I know how I succeed, I'll write to her and explain everything. If she hadn't a home and—and friends; but she has. I have my own way to make, and I'm going to make it. That's enough about myself. Nothing you can say will influence me in the least. I'm going to be a singer, and I'm going to be nothing else."

"You are? Well, if you are planning to be a singing-machine, you'll make one grand failure. What the public wants is just this: mechanical accuracy, with warm heart's-blood sprinkled in. If you don't give that great ogre both the accuracy and the blood it 'll hoot you off the stage. I know it. I never did give it accuracy, but I had something that made it put up with me for a time; my day is over now. Yes, my day is over. Sometimes I think if my aunt Leonora Runciman didn't happen to be up to the pious dodge just now, I'd go to her and cry, 'Save me, aunt, save me!'—like opera, you know. But I know what she'd do—she'd offer to pray with me; and I certainly couldn't stand being prayed with; Aunt Nora doing the praying act, and doing it sincerely, would be too much. Well, Billy, do you want to try your hand at the saving business? If so, here's your material ready."

Bashy put a hand on each hip and pranced across the room singing that thing beginning,

"A sinner vile, I come to thee—
A sinner vile, I swear I be—"

At this point in her melody, the girl's voice broke. She sat down in the nearest chair and covered her face with her hands, sobbing aloud.

Billy did not know what to do. She sat for an instant staring at her guest. Had Bathsheba always been as coarse as she seemed now, or—here she broke off her questioning and rose to go to the girl, but Bashy, hearing her move, without taking her hands from her face, said, imperatively:

"Don't come here until I've told you something."

Billy paused half-way across the room. She felt a temptation to go out at that open door, but she did not stir. A hot breath of air came in at the window, and it brought faintly from a neighboring street the strains of the blind man's fiddle; it was "Hear me, Norma," again.

"You said you were going to England?" Bashy spoke behind her hands, which still covered her face.

"Yes," wonderingly.

"In that Cunarder, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"I was planning to go in that steamer."

"Then you're going with me, as I proposed, after all."

Bashy dropped her hands and raised her head boldly.

"Did you ever hear of Fred Lovell?" she asked.

She had mentioned the name of a man notorious for his wealth and his licentiousness.

Billy had heard of him, and she said so.

"Yes, everybody knows of Fred Lovell. I had planned to go with him on that steamer. Quite a good joke that you go, too, isn't it?"

And now Bashy began to laugh as violently as she had sobbed.

XXIV

AT THE WHARF

WITH the suddenness that sometimes characterized her actions, Bashy stopped laughing, pulled the diamond from her finger, and flung it into a corner of the room.

"Did he give you that?"

Billy put this inquiry in a cold tone, and involuntarily stepped back as she spoke.

"Yes, he gave me that. Now you're going to play the part of a virtuous woman, are you? I always did think a virtuous woman could do more evil than a dozen smirched people with the mercy of God in their hearts. Oh!" her voice rising to a sharp cry, "Heaven deliver me from a virtuous woman, I say!"

She stamped her foot. She turned towards the door and had passed through into the bit of a hall, when her hand was caught with some roughness. Billy's face was red.

"Come back," she said. She spoke hardly above a whisper, but there was authority in her phrase, and she was obeyed.

Bashy stood before her. Billy dropped the hand, but she slipped her arm about the girl's neck.

"You'll send that ring to that man, won't you?"

The authority was all gone from her manner; a great gentleness was in its place.

"I might as well keep on with him. He'll be sick of me soon enough," defiantly.

"And we'll go to England together. Perhaps we'll stay together after we're there."

"Oh, you're going to try to reform me?" bitterly.

"Bashy, we'll keep together."

Billy leaned forward and kissed the girl's cheek.

The lines in that face quivered, then broke up, as the features became convulsed with weeping. She put her head on Billy's shoulder.

"Oh, you're not going to stand off and preach to me, are you?"

Billy smoothed the thick, much-fluffed hair. She did not speak.

"I'll send back the ring."

"Of course."

"And I'll go with you."

"Yes, yes."

"You needn't think I'm so awfully vile. The ring was a kind of—well, a kind of an engagement-ring"—a half-stifled laugh—"in sign that I'd go with him, you know. He's been after me for a couple of months. He says I'm the first woman he ever fell in love with that wasn't namby-pamby; he says if he wasn't already married, he'd marry me. He says I'm as jolly as a man and as pretty as a woman. Oh, how I hate myself!—but I like myself too."

By this time Bashy was both laughing and crying. She had withdrawn from her companion; she crossed the room and picked up the ring.

"It's just a sparkler, isn't it? Plenty more where that came from."

She approached with the diamond in the palm of her hand. She contemplated Billy in silence before she said:

"I'm not so sure that some things are much worse than others. You, yourself, are a hard wretch to treat your mother so. I couldn't have treated my mother in that way for all the world. I say, now, if you save me, I'm going to turn about and save you. Then we'll be quits. Isn't that fair? If you take my promise to break with that man, you shall write to your mother this very day. Is it a bargain?"

Billy hesitated.

"I write to her almost every day—only I don't send what I write," she said. "It isn't that I've forgotten her—it isn't that. Something—"

Here she paused and plainly was not going to finish her sentence. She was looking over Bashy's head with an absent, intent gaze.

"Much good it does her to have you write that way."

No response to this. Bashy picked up her jaunty bicycling cap; she put it on her head at an angle. She looked down at the long russet boots she wore, then she fastened one of them afresh. Finally, she stood erect and cried:

"Well, you are a hard nut, Wilhelmina Armstrong. I used to suspect there was a chunk of rock in you somewhere. Good-bye."

For the second time she walked to the door, and now she reached the sidewalk before any attempt was made to detain her, then her name was called sharply and she returned to the room.

"Bathsheba, this is ridiculous," said Billy, in what the other girl afterwards described as a high moral tone. "You don't understand me or my circumstances."

"Nor you me."

"You are planning a wicked, disgraceful thing."

"So are you."

Billy flushed.

"Do you compare yourself with me?"

"Come now, I like that!"

"Bashy!"

"Billy!"

"Anyway, I sha'n't let you go with that man. Oh, Bashy!" her voice suddenly beginning to tremble, "you don't know—I'm not hard; I'm the softest-hearted creature in the world. We'll go on that Cunarder, and I'll send a letter to mother the day we start."

"All right. Now I'll wheel away from love and thee; but I'll return to love and thee."

"No, you're not going. I don't trust you; or if you do go, I shall bear you company. Perhaps you'll meet that man, and he'll persuade you—"

"Pshaw! I'm thankful to be out of it. If I loved him 'twould be a different thing. Do you think I'm going to leave all my frocks behind? You may come with me, though."

So Bashy left her wheel, and the two girls went to the South End boarding-house where Bashy was stopping, Billy wondering all the way if her companion had really always been like this. She shrank somewhat when she looked at her, but she kept to her resolution, and would not part with her. She helped her pack her trunk, and the two went in a carriage back to Roxbury with it.

When they returned Bashy established herself in a chair in her friend's room and put her feet on another chair. She drew her case of cigarettes from her jacket pocket—a dainty case it was—and held it towards Billy.

"Smoke?"

"No."

"You'd better—finest Turkish, with just a dash of opium—make life endurable. Take one."

"No."

"What a devilish rigid little Puritan it is!" striking a match on the sole of her boot. "But you always were. How you did look when you first saw wine! And yet you're up to things, too"—whiff, whiff. "I hope this smoke isn't disagreeable to you, for I've got to puff for a while; formed the habit, you see."

Bashy half shut her eyes as she expelled the blue cloud through her nostrils. The one window was opened high. There was barely room for the bed and the two occupants. Billy had seated herself on the side of the bed. She felt half sick with pity, and that something which repulsed her so strongly; and she was continually asking herself: "What am I? Why should I feel myself better than any one?"

The temptation to let the girl go was strong, but she would not yield to it.

Bashy was watching her. Suddenly she exclaimed:

"Mighty fine feeling, isn't it?"

"What feeling?"

"Why, 'I'm better than thou.' It must set one up to feel like that. Never knew what it was."

Billy held herself quietly in her place, though resentment tingled through her.

"Don't make me angry," she said, at last.

Bashy leaned forward and flung the remnant of her cigarette from the window.

"Fact is, Wilhelmina," she said, emphatically, "you *are* better than I am. But I'm going to be good now; kick me out if I'm not."

Billy never quite knew how the time passed between them and the hour of sailing. She was conscious of a growing excitement. She would not allow Bashy out of her sight; all at once it seemed to her as if she were responsible for the salvation of her old acquaintance.

The two kept their agreement with each other. At the very last moment Billy mailed this note to her mother:

"I hope you'll forgive me. I love you just the same, but there's a lump of ice in my heart. You needn't worry one bit about me. I'm going to be a singer. After a while I'll write to you again. I hope Mr. Meloon is gaining. I suppose he condemns me, but I can't help that. Don't forget that I love you just the same."

This note she dropped in a box on her way to the wharf. She had insisted that Bashy should write to "that man"—this was what she called Mr. Lovell; but the girl said she couldn't; she didn't know where he was; he had gone to New York, and the agreement was that he was to come back in time for the sailing of that steamer; she was to go aboard; they were to meet there. At this information Billy very nearly drew back from her resolution. The whole affair seemed to her so low, so intolerably vulgar, aside from its evil.

She waited; what else was there for her to do?—and it was not long to wait. She had received a hurried epistle from Boldrea; he hoped she was ready. It grieved him to state that madame had been indisposed or she would have called again upon Miss Armstrong. Madame had partaken too freely of fat liver pie, and was suffering from indigestion. At this Billy curled an intolerant lip, since her shortcomings did not lie in the direction of *pâté de foie gras.*

As the hour approached she grew more and more excited. The two agreed to go aboard very early. Billy had an acute fear that Bashy would fail to keep her word, she had such a dare-devil, inconsequent way with her. The more she doubted, the more resolved she was to succeed; she shuddered away from the thought of what might become of the girl; and Billy liked to tell herself that she had been sent to do this service—the thought was a sop to her conscience.

It was Boldrea who had secured the inferior room into which Billy retreated as soon as she came on board. She sat down dismally in the one chair and smelled the salt water, and the tar, and the coal-gas which one can generally smell before the boat gets out where the wind sweeps away odors. She was so desolate that she could have rushed back to the wharf and started to walk to the Meloon farm. The very thought of that breezy stretch of country, with the glory and purity of God's blue sky above it, made her throat contract as if she would suffocate.

"Am I still such a weak creature?" she asked herself.

And very likely Bathsheba would do some strange thing. That man would be coming.

At this thought Billy's anxious fear grew so great that she went on deck. The sun was beating down mercilessly; the planks of the wharf emitted small bubbling patches of moisture; there was not a cloud in the sky. The faces of the men trundling baggage were purple and wet; the horses sweat piteously; a hot land wind was blowing softly. The loads of goods and the carriages with passengers came faster and faster; people bearing great bunches of flowers for the state-rooms of their friends were coming up the gangway. But Billy did not know that she noticed all this.

In a few moments after she had opened her umbrella towards the sun, she saw Bashy hurry across the plank to the wharf. Billy leaned on the rail and watched her. A carriage had just dashed up, and a tall man with floating Dundreary whiskers jumped out. He lifted his hat jauntily to Bashy and extended his left hand to her. Billy was quite near them, and she could see the stranger's face change soon from easy complacence to anger.

"That is Fred Lovell," she said to herself, "and if he is merely angry, Bashy will resist."

The two talked hurriedly. Meanwhile a servant swung off a small trunk from the carriage and took it up the gangway. Billy heard him inquire for Mr. Lovell's state-room, and pass on with his burden. She gazed sharply at the man's face; she could see only the back of Bashy's head; she saw nothing else save those two, and as they walked farther along the wharf, still keeping near the edge, she turned that she might not lose sight of them.

She saw Lovell's face change and soften; she saw him take his companion's hand; he was pleading with her now, and something in Bashy's attitude, something in her very shoulders, seemed to hint that she was yielding.

Billy's umbrella dropped unheeded over the side, catching between boat and wharf. She grasped the rail and leaned far forward.

"Bashy!" she cried, "Bashy! remember your promise. Come, I'm waiting for you."

Having said this, she felt that she dared not wait another instant. She turned and hurried to the gangway, thinking of nothing but the girl whom she must save.

At the end of the plank she was met by a tall man on crutches, moving slowly, but with a decided aspect of determination.

XXV

LOTOS RETURNS

BILLY stopped as if she had been grasped by a hand. Meloon, very pale and gaunt, smiled a little as he saw the girl. Then he said:

"I thought I should find you."

Billy remembered her note to her mother, and that it had been posted only a few hours ago.

"You were looking for me?" she responded, feebly.

"Yes; I've been looking for you for ten days. It's a good thing to find what you seek." He paused, gazing at her. "And now," he added, "you will go back with me—that is, if you think you've already been wicked enough," sternly.

Billy stood with her hands twisted together, her eyes lowered, a red spot on each cheek.

"Mother—" she began; but she could not go on.

"Your mother has been nearly insane. I did not dream that you were so hard-hearted."

"You tell her," began Billy, hurriedly—"tell her that I'm well; and that I've written to her. I'm going to sing—she hates that—she is unhappy with me when I'm trying to sing. I wouldn't drag her into that again. And she has a home—she can work for you—I'm going—the boat will start soon. Don't think I'm ungrateful, or so bad, please, Mr. Meloon. I can't bear to have you think I'm bad. Everything has driven me on. You don't understand—nobody understands. There's only one thing for me to do—to sing. If I live I'm going to sing. I wish you'd go away now, Mr. Meloon."

She spoke thickly, her words at last becoming so indistinct that they were hardly like words.

The two had drawn a few yards aside from the plank, but they were jostled by the hurrying people. Now she raised her eyes to her companion.

"Are you well, Mr. Meloon?" she asked.

"Certainly. Billy, you are to go back with me."

"No—no. Nothing could make me go back."

"Is my home such a horrible place as that?"

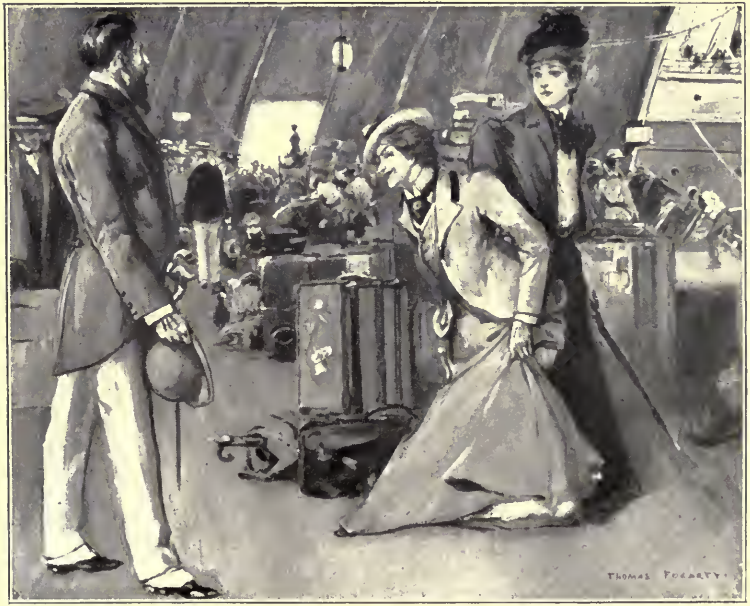
He put the question in the hurried way in which they were both obliged to speak; and he immediately continued: "Of course, I know it is dull for you; but your mother—"

"Oh, where is Bashy?" interrupted Billy. "I had forgotten her. How could I forget her?"

She ran past Meloon, who swung round on his crutches to watch her, his brows drawing together as he did so.

His glance instantly took in the air and manner of Bathsheba Hildreth, and he despised her far more, perhaps, than was just. He saw Billy put her arm about the dashing girl, who wore her hat on one side, and who had a fast look. But he could not hear what was said.

Lovell involuntarily retreated a step, and glanced wrathfully at this intruder. Then his glance changed somewhat. He was one of those insufferable beasts of men whom one sees in such numbers in all large cities, just out of the bath, finely groomed, well dressed, filthily eying every attractive young woman; thinking vile things of all women; and yet hav-


THOMAS FOGARTY.

“‘GOOD-BYE, TA-TA!’”

ing a kind of way with him, a sort of animal good-nature and generosity, if he isn't crossed.

"Come," said Billy, "there's only a moment more."

Lovell took off his hat with a grace.

"Friend of yours, Miss Hildreth? Pray present me."

"No," said Billy, "you need not present him, Bashy. Come."

"Gad!" exclaimed the man. "This *is* a go!"

Bashy laughed loudly; then she replied:

"No, Mr. Lovell, that's just what it isn't—a go. Good-bye, ta—ta."

She dropped a courtesy; then, clutching her friend's hand, she ran, and made Billy run, till they came to the gangway. Meloon was standing in the same place. As she went by him Billy met his eyes. She dropped the hand and gave Bashy a little push up the plank.

"Don't look so, please," she said; "I'm taking her away from all that. Don't you see? Don't you understand?"

There was time for no more. The warning had been given. Billy hastened away. The people who had been saying adieux hurried to the wharf. The great ship began to throb and heave, and churn the water somewhere down in her depths; the wharf receded, at first it seemed but a few inches, then a chasm came between it and the boat.

Billy and Bashy stood together, hand in hand, near the bows. Lovell had sworn a good many oaths, but he had not gone on board. He stepped into his carriage and cursed at the servant who ventured to ask, "Where to?" Then he was driven out of sight, thinking as much of the face of that other girl as of Bathsheba Hildreth's.

As for Meloon, he leaned on his crutches there, watching the steamer out. He waved his hat at the slender figure at a particular place near the rail.

At last he went slowly along the wharf until he came to a carriage that was waiting for him. Then, at the door, he turned back to a telegraph-office close by. He sent this message to Mrs. Armstrong:

"Found. She starts for Liverpool to-day."

He sat down in the carriage and drew his crutches up beside him. He was thinking that he was not only old, but lame.

He ordered himself to be driven to the station. He would go home as soon as possible.

"There's Trooper — he'll be glad to see me. I ought to be happy with Trooper."

So he went home. A little wild-eyed woman came running down the lane to meet him. Seeing her, he dismissed the public carriage he had hired to bring him and came forward on foot. Mrs. Armstrong did not speak at first; she made an attempt, but her poor, quivering lips refused to obey her; so she waited, walking beside the man, who hurriedly asked:

"Did they bring my telegram?"

"No—no."

"Oh, well, they'll get it here in a week or two. But it's all right, Serissa—that is, I rather think it's all right."

"You've seen her?"

"Yes—yes. She was just embarking."

Meloon was thinking that his news was very bare indeed.

"Embarking?"

"Yes—to Liverpool, you know."

The woman gave a cry, and then plainly tried to compose herself.

"Was Vane Hildreth with her?"

"Well, he wasn't visible. Possibly his search hasn't been as successful as mine."

"Depend upon it, he was there. He'd be sure to find her. He loves her, you know."

"Yes, I am aware of that fact. He told me himself."

Meloon was going beyond the woman beside him, out towards the hills of the sheep pasture.

"Was she alone, then?"

"No; there was a young woman with her, dashing, impudent, with big eyes that she used; dressed as nearly like a man as the law allows—damn her!"

"That must have been Bashy."

"Bashy? Good name for her. Who is she, anyway?"

"Don't you know? She is Vane's sister. Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

Here Mrs. Armstrong lost all pretence of control and fell to sobbing and wringing her hands, crying out that since Meloon had seen Miny and had not brought her back he was responsible for everything that happened to her forever after.

Meloon set his mouth and bore this through all the slow moments that it required to reach the house.

With his hand on the door he turned and said, huskily:

"Now, Serissa, stop this. One more word and I shall say something terrible, and despise myself ever after. Of course I don't know how you feel, since I'm not Billy's mother. But I couldn't bring the girl back unless I had seized and flung her into the carriage"—here he paused—"and an old fellow on crutches is past kidnapping girls. She said she was going to sing. You've no reason to doubt her, have you? If Hildreth is with her, we can't help that. We can't help anything. As for me, I'm going to see about harvesting. And you, Serissa, stay here and work—work is the greatest thing in the world. Where's Trooper?"

"I shut him in your bedroom—he's taken to howling so since you've been away."

"Howling? Bright dog. I'll go and howl with him."

Meloon found Trooper with his nose at the crack between the door and the casing, his tail wagging, his whole body in a quiver of joyful expectancy.

Man and dog remained secluded for some time, and when they emerged Meloon seemed to have aged several years. He went out into the field to see what his hired men were doing, and Trooper walked contentedly at his heels.

That evening, when he and his housekeeper were in the sitting-room, with doors and windows open, the warm air full of the piping of insects, she began to bemoan the going of her child, her treble complaining rising above all the night sounds.

Meloon listened for a long time, not speaking. He had taken his violin, but his hand, which held the bow, had fallen to his side. There was no lamp in the room, only a fragrant dusk, with the moonlight outside.

Mrs. Armstrong paused with a half sob.

"Are you through?" suddenly asked Meloon. He moved in his chair, and the violin on his knees twanged faintly.

"I—I don't know," in surprise.

"I thought I wouldn't stop you too soon. If you have anything more to say just now, speak it."

"Why—why—I don't understand. Shouldn't I mourn for my child?"

"Certainly; mourn all you please; but she isn't dead. She may return—to you. As for me I shall probably never see her again. It isn't likely that she'll come back to the Meloon farm. What I wanted to say is this—are you listening, Serissa?"

"Yes—but you frighten me, Rawdon. What do you mean?"

"That you are not to speak of your daughter to me again. Do you hear? I want to know nothing more about her—nothing. If you have a letter from her, don't mention it."

"Why, I didn't know you disliked her so. I don't think you need to hate her, quite."

And then the mother fell into voluble sentences in defence of her daughter; in manner she was much like a hen that fluffs up and squawks when the shadow of a hawk darkens the sky.

Meloon's dim shape in the big chair by the window did not move; you would have said that he did not hear a word. But when Mrs. Armstrong had spent her breath, he said:

"You understand—after to-night Wilhelmina Armstrong is not to be mentioned before me."

Mrs. Armstrong fell silent, putting her handkerchief up to her face, her shoulders rising and falling.

Meloon raised his violin to his shoulder and drew his bow across the strings. Perhaps the sound comforted him. Presently he sang in a half-tone as he played:

"The hawk unto the open sky,
  The red deer to the wold;
The Romany lass for the Romany lad,
  As in the days of old."

His voice had not risen much above a whisper.

Before he had pronounced the last word the great dog lying at his feet asleep started up growling. The two listened, but they heard nothing. Meloon raised his bow again, but before it touched the strings Trooper growled again; and now they both heard a quick scratching at the screen door and a whining.

Meloon sprang up, forgetting his lameness. He hardly knew how he reached the screen; he flung it back and a dark shape sprang at him.

"It's Lotos," said Meloon. Mrs. Armstrong kindled a lamp.

There was Lotos bedraggled with water and dust, his chest wet with the droppings from his lolling tongue. He stood now panting so that his swelling sides seemed ready to burst.

"Oh, he's mad!" cried Mrs. Armstrong.

"He's only tired."

The dog now threw himself on his side on the floor, his tongue falling out on the carpet; unable to lie still, he rose to his haunches and sat heaving there, then took a few steps. Trooper stood glumly behind his master.

Meloon hobbled into the kitchen and came back with a dish of water, which he set down before the dog. Lotos drank and drank, looked up, slobbering and wagging his tail, then drank again.

Meloon leaned over and unfastened a tag from the collar; he read it; it was merely the address to him at the Meloon farm, with the name of the express by which the animal had been forwarded. But there was something else on the collar—a small package fastened in strong gray cloth. This Meloon also removed and extended it towards Mrs. Armstrong.

By this time Lotos was able to lie down and remain in that position.

Meloon went back to his chair and Trooper went with him. He saw his companion unfasten the package and draw a paper from it, glance at it, then hold it towards him, saying:

"It ain't for me."

Meloon, therefore, read what was on the paper:

> "DEAR MR. MELOON,—At the last moment it seems as if I could not take my dear dog. I send him to you. I know you will take care of him. If I live I shall come for him—and shall thank you. Tell mother that though I seem hard, my heart is breaking."

Billy had not signed this.

After a moment Meloon passed the note to Mrs. Armstrong, who read it, and then exclaimed:

"I declare, that's just the way Vane sent Lotos to Miny!"

Meloon reached forward, took the bit of paper, and thrust it into his vest pocket.

Early the next morning the expressman from the village came to the farm. He said the dog had got away when he was taking him from the car at the station, and had dashed like mad across the field. He was thankful to be rid of him.

XXVI

HILDRETH ALSO RETURNS

THE days went on apace at the farm, hot, fragrant days when the earth panted and the corn grew so fast that in walking between rows of it you might almost see the ears as they flung out their silky tassels; and if you drew one of the long, cool leaves through your hand in the morning, at night you would fancy that it was longer and broader. The crows perched for hours in the tops of the pines on the hills, watching that corn-field, and sometimes they sent a deputation down to sample the ears. These deputies ripped open the tender sheaths and plunged their ruthless bills into the small, milky kernels; then left them to report that the corn wasn't ready.

Meloon walked with a cane; he was walking a good deal. He came out frequently to this corn-field with his gun. He was followed now by two dogs instead of one. Trooper calmly and loftily tolerated Lotos.

Though Meloon took a gun with which to shoot crows, he never shot one; he never even tried to shoot one. He used to sit down in the shade of a pine-tree with the dogs at his feet. After a time a crow would come floating along within splendid aim. Once or twice the man raised his gun to his shoulder, but he dropped it without pulling the trigger.

Then he would stroke down the ends of his great mustache, and smile under it.

"Let 'em live—likely as not they like to live," he said, aloud. He glanced about, and added: "And it is a bonny world to live in; there's something in the mere drawing of one's breath"—he inflated his lungs.

He had fallen into the habit of talking to himself—"like other old men," he explained in his monologue. But he was barely forty-five. He knew very well, however, what youth thinks of forty years. One might as well be sixty, or dead, as to be forty years old. Then he would tug again at that grizzled mustache.

He had always read poetry a good deal, but now he read it more than ever—not mere verse, or mere rhyme, but poetry.

"There's no fool so sentimental as an old fool," he used to say, in these lonely excursions about the farm.

To his great surprise he was not unhappy—the contrary, rather, in a mild way, suitable, as he thought, to an elderly person. Somehow life seemed to clarify for him; he couldn't explain, but he could feel and know.

But he could not hear Mrs. Armstrong talk of her daughter. Of course, at first, she was continually beginning something about Wilhelmina. Meloon used to get up and leave the room. If it were at the table he never finished that meal; if it were in the evening he did not return.

So, perforce, his housekeeper learned her lesson.

In due course a letter came from over the water. Meloon brought it from the post-office, and handed it to Mrs. Armstrong, whose hand trembled as she took it. By that time she knew she must not speak of it, that Meloon had really meant it when he had said he would not hear a word about Billy. How he must dislike her!

By harvesting time Meloon could help somewhat in the lighter work. The two dogs were always with him. If occasionally Lotos lingered, he heard a cheery whistle and trotted to obey.

One day Meloon was in the corn-field with his men. They were flinging the ears into a long cart. It was a clear, warm fall day. Meloon straightened himself to look off towards the hills. He saw a man coming swiftly down the slope from the sheep pasture; two or three sheep were straggling along behind him.

"That's Hildreth," he thought, watching; and he unconsciously stiffened in his attitude among the clipped stalks. "What's he over here for? I thought when he went to find Billy that he was through with this part of the world."

Hildreth came on rapidly. Presently he beckoned to Meloon to join him at the fence that surrounded the corn-field.

"I didn't want those men to hear me," he said, abruptly, when the other had come near. He grasped the top rail of the fence as if to lean on it. He looked worn. He glanced about him.

"Nothing changes here," he said, with bitterness.

"Did you expect there'd been an earthquake because a girl had chosen to run away?" responded Meloon. He saw immediately that this man had not been successful in his search, and he was greatly surprised.

"Yes," with some fierceness; "there ought to be earthquakes and tempests all over the world. I couldn't find her."

"And the crops have kept on growing just the same."

Meloon laughed, but his laughter did not jar upon his hearer.

"I've had a terrible time looking everywhere. She told me she would write. She has lied to me. I didn't think she would lie."

"She will write—in time."

"Are you defending her?" savagely. "It's curious how a girl will change a man's life. Sometimes I feel as if I could kill her. She belongs to me, anyway."

"How is that?" coolly.

"Because the minister married us—and she was happy that half-hour on the train with me after he had said we were man and wife—man and wife—do you hear? You can't unsay such words—you needn't tell me that you can. And she surely loved me then."

Hildreth paused; he took off his hat and looked into it in an indefinite way. Then he looked at Meloon and smiled forlornly.

"What rot have I been talking? I should say I was what you might call an unmanly driveller. I despise a driveller, don't you, Meloon? I'm going to sing this fall if my voice don't turn rusty. I meant to sing with her. Where the devil has she gone? Her mother promised that she would send me word—I told her where a word would finally reach me—if Billy wrote. She hasn't. Billy would write to her mother at last. Has the old lady lied to me, too? I say, Meloon"—reaching over the fence and grasping the front of Meloon's frock and shaking him while his face turned a sort of blue white—"I say, what makes you look like that? Eh?

Did you go after her?—you? And you found her? Eh? Can't you speak?"

Hildreth's voice had been thickening as it went on. He made an effort and cleared it somewhat.

"You're all a pack of liars here—she as well as the rest, only I care for her; she's my wife."

Meloon had put a hand on each shoulder of the young man and held him pressed against the fence, otherwise it seemed as if Hildreth might fall.

"Don't call us hard names," said the elder man, gently. "I did try to find Miss Armstrong. Why shouldn't I try? I—"

"You found her? By —— you found her!" furiously.

"Yes—just in time to see her sail away on the Cunarder with your sister, Hildreth. Hold on to yourself, man! You're worn out. Come here, somebody, and help me"—turning and shouting towards the men gathering corn, for Hildreth had fallen forward limply, then sank in a huddle on the ground at the other side of the fence.

XXVII

CALM DAYS

THE young man rallied, however, the next day. He rose from his bed and came into the kitchen, where he found Mrs. Armstrong. There was something feminine and pleading in his eyes, and the woman hastened to him; she took his hand and he clung to it; he put his arm about her neck and kissed her cheek, as he had done before. Then he said, apologetically:

"I'm not always such a weak creature. You see: I've been flat with a fever, and it's left me childish, I suppose."

He sat down wearily in a chair close by. He leaned his head on his hand, gazing at the floor, as he asked:

"You've heard from her?"

"Yes; but she didn't write anything."

Hildreth looked up suspiciously.

"What do you mean by that? You know I'm going to find her. You needn't keep anything back. I'd have been with her by this time if it hadn't been for that fever. She knows as well as I do that there's no one can sing with her as I can. I can help her in her ambition. That's all she cares for—her ambition. She's a hard, cold woman. But I'm going to help her all the same. She belongs to me, you know."

Hildreth had spoken with great rapidity and emphasis. He finished by saying again: "You needn't keep anything back. Where is she?"

Mrs. Armstrong felt a sort of gratitude to this young man. She longed to have some one interested in her daughter. It was trying that Meloon didn't wish to hear anything. She felt a desire to be voluble on the subject. It was not enough that she should pray night and morning about Miny.

"I don't know where she is," she answered.

She had sat down with the dish of raisins she was stoning for cake. She rose again, unable to be quiet. She took a cloth and began to dust the legs of a chair.

"How can you tell where Miny is?" quaveringly. "She's so headstrong that she'll send me into my grave. She—"

"Where was her letter from?" impatiently.

"From London. She said she was in London; but what of that? You might as well say you're in Babylon and expect somebody to know where you are. You—"

"Will you let me see the letter?" again interrupting.

"Just as lives as not." Mrs. Armstrong pulled the letter from a pocket in her skirt, and Hildreth sprang to take it. It was short enough:

"DEAR MOTHER,—Here I am safe in London. You needn't worry one bit about me. Bashy—just think, Bashy!—is with me. I'm as wise as a serpent about taking care of myself. Tell Vane that I'll write to him some time, because I promised; but not at present. Don't—please don't—worry about me."

Hildreth handed back the note in silence.

"She doesn't say much, does she?"

"She means to cut herself adrift from her old life—that's what she means."

The young man turned to leave the room.

"Oh, Mr. Hildreth, you ain't going now, are you?"

"Certainly. Why should I stay here? I have a lot of things to do—get up my strength since my fever—practise my voice—find Miss Armstrong. But you've been very kind to me, Mrs. Armstrong—I thank you."

He went back and took the woman's hand, holding it close between his palms for a moment. As he stood thus two tears left his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. He felt weak and childish, and indignant that he felt so. It seemed to him that the old gay, care-free, somewhat inconsequent man he used to be was gone—he did not know where. And at this thought he felt angry and vindictive towards Wilhelmina.

In the yard Hildreth met Meloon and the dogs. The young man tried to say something about his gratitude to the master of the house, but he made a boggle of his words and suddenly stopped, leaning against a tree for support.

The end of the interview was that Meloon made him go into the house and lie down on the lounge in the sitting-room.

"If you have strength to get up you can't find a better place to do it than among these hills," he said.

But Hildreth only remained a week; he was stung by a thousand hopes and memories; still he gained in health, in spite of himself.

Mrs. Armstrong stood by Meloon as the two watched Hildreth go away; he was driven in a carriage by one of the hired men. He turned and waved his hat at them.

"For my part," said Mrs. Armstrong, "I do wish Miny would marry him and behave like other girls. I haven't a doubt but that she loves him—in fact, I know she does. But she's got that singing business into her head—thanks to that Runciman woman."

Meloon made no response. He was standing with his hat in his hand under the big cherry-tree that grew near the shed door. Presently he began to smile to himself in a sort of derision at his own sentimentality, for he was repeating in his mind those lines of Browning:

" . . . her delicious eyes as clear as heaven
When rain in a quick shower has beat down mist,
And clouds float white in the sun like broods of swans."

In a moment, however, he turned towards the open doorway where Mrs. Armstrong still stood.

"Well, Serissa," he said, "the old folks are left to grub along as they can. Of course she loves him; I don't doubt it in the least; and there's something very lovable about him too, though I've seen men with a more rugged, tougher fibre. But what do you expect of a tenor singer?"

Meloon laughed and began to hum in his rough barytone:

"She comes like the husht beauty of the night,
But sees too deep for laughter;
Her touch is a vibration and a light
From worlds before and after."

Mrs. Armstrong had been listening.

"I'm sure I don't know what that means," she said.

Meloon laughed still more.

"I don't know myself; perhaps nobody knows.

But it has a fine kind of a twang to it, eh?" And he hummed again:

> "Her touch is a vibration and a light
> From worlds before and after."

Then he walked away, going on up the field at the back of the house, the dogs trailing behind.

It seemed but a short time now before it was cold weather and the first snow came in a little premonitory flurry, melting away immediately.

Billy had given no address, and her mother could not write to her, and Billy herself had not written again. And not a word had come from Vane Hildreth. The two had drifted off into another world.

Meantime at the farm it seemed very cosey. A great fire of cord-wood was always burning on the hearth in the sitting-room.

A girl from the village came two days a week to help Mrs. Armstrong with the hardest of the work. Meloon had given up his cane; he was hale and cheerful. People in the houses here and there had settled from the first that he would eventually marry his housekeeper.

"'N' real sootable it 'll be, too." Mrs. Armstrong herself, however, began to doubt that this was her employer's intention, though such an arrangement seemed suitable to her also. Her days were full. In the evenings she sat by the little stand at the other side of the fire. She had an open Bible on the stand beneath the lamp; as she mended stockings or knit she sometimes read a verse. The days were quiet and peaceful. Meloon told her again and again that she needn't worry about Billy; he assured her that, though the girl was full of romance, she yet had a good strong streak of old-fashioned common-sense in her make-up.

"Let her fly—she is bound to try her wings," he said. And he added, with a smile: "Indeed we can't help ourselves." That's all he would allow to be said of the girl.

Then he would make his bow whisper confidentially to the fiddle-strings, for he had fallen into a way of taking his violin when he sat down of an evening, though sometimes he would not play at all, but held the instrument with a sort of tenderness. It was an old violin of a somewhat famous make, one of his "early extravagances," he called it. He would hold it up to his ear and listen.

"Don't you know," he said to Mrs. Armstrong, "that these old fiddles keep all the harmonies that have ever been played on them?—and if you are *en rapport* with them, they will whisper and murmur this long-ago music, and you may hear it."

"That was one of Miny's notions," returned the mother. "She had lots of such notions, but I never could find head nor tail to 'em—childish, I call it."

XXVIII

AT THE TICKET-OFFICE

THERE was opera in Boston, though if you were up among the New Hampshire mountains you would not have believed that there could anywhere be gay dressing, the flashing of diamonds, the melodious love-making and quarrelling among tenors, and sopranos, and contraltos. Those "cloud-capped granite hills" would have nothing of any such life; their own grandeurs were enough.

A light cutter, drawn by a slender, swift-going mare, was sliding along the lane that led from the main road to the Meloon farm. The owner of that farm, muffled to his nose, was holding the reins, and apparently he was the power that kept the mare from absolutely flying through space. As it was, she whizzed around the corner of the house to the barn, the snow flying from under her feet, the sleigh going mostly on one runner.

Presently Meloon came into the shed, and his housekeeper, gathering some chips into her apron, hurried to meet him.

"Any letters?"

"No," stamping the snow from his boots. "But there's a paper—yesterday's paper, you know. The opera season has begun in Boston."

Mrs. Armstrong's apron suddenly fell, and the chips scattered; but she would not speak her daughter's name. Through all these dreary months—and it was now February—she had hardly spoken the girl's name, save when she was praying to God for the child's safety. She thought Meloon hard and cold, and he was usually kind. She did not understand. And it seemed to her as if she herself was falling from grace in some way, for her visions of the coming of Christ to this earth were infrequent in these days, and blurred when they did appear. She had begun to think more and more that she had committed a great sin in not forcibly preventing Miny from going back to the wicked world. A great sin—mayhap it was the unpardonable sin—who could tell? In the silence of those glittering winter days in the country Mrs. Armstrong's narrow mind turned more and more to that subject, and her face settled into a gloom.

Meloon flung back his buffalo-skin coat and drew out the Boston daily. Mrs. Armstrong hurried away with it.

Ten minutes later Meloon, going into the sitting-room, found Serissa kneeling by a chair, her face hidden, and incoherent words of supplication coming rapidly from her lips. She did not notice his entrance, but went on praying.

The newspaper lay open on the floor near her. Meloon said nothing. He stepped forward gently, took up the paper, and walked away with it. He shut the doors between him and the kitchen. The sound of that prayer was to him something like blows upon bruised flesh. Then he had a half-formed wish that he might be able to pray; life was such a muddle at the best, and the thing you wanted was usually beyond reach.

"We get a lot of discipline out of it, at any rate; and perhaps that's all life is meant to be."

He said this grimly as his eyes ran over the printed page. He had purposely abstained from opening the paper at the post-office, but he had long known the date of the beginning of the opera season in Boston. It was, he thought, like having a knowledge of something that was going to take place in Jupiter.

There was the ordinary advertisement of the opera under the head of amusements. For "Lucia," Wilhelmina Armstrong in the title rôle, Vane Hildreth as Edgardo.

Meloon having read this, put down the paper for a moment. There is a curious something in the most of us that prompts to more or less brief periods of self-torture; often followed by seasons of greater self-indulgence, the pendulum always striving for an equilibrium.

The afternoon sun was making a blinding light on the stretches of snow outside, and by this light Meloon found and read the long criticism on the first hearing and seeing the new *prima donna*. The critic at the beginning made an effort to speak of faults with that air of superiority which such people use, but shortly he abandoned this attempt and gave himself up to the superlatives that were evidently crowding to the point of his pen. He even went so far as to mention "the delicious tonal coloring" which characterized Miss Armstrong's voice. He said that never before had any woman been able to act and sing at once with restraint and also with abandon. She possessed both art and warmth. In the duet with Edgardo—

But here the paper rustled so in Meloon's hands that he could not read; he was smiling in derision.

"Bosh! He's making phrases," he exclaimed. "But, of course, in the duet with Edgardo—"

He turned the page. There were several places where the opening of the opera season was mentioned—the enthusiasm of the audience—the recalls and recalls. And a paragraph asked if it were true that Miss Armstrong was really Mr. Hildreth's wife. And Mr. Hildreth himself never sang with nearly so much precision and fire—he was evidently inspired, and no wonder. He was taking his place in the very front rank—and so on, and so on.

And now Meloon flung the paper from him with some violence. He looked at his watch. Then he went to the barn and found a man chopping feed.

"Put the mare into the cutter again and take me over to the station," he said.

"You can't git that five o'clock train," was the response.

"I can, and I will."

On his way to his own room Meloon heard Mrs. Armstrong still praying, but he put his head in at the door and interrupted.

"Serissa, I'm going down to Boston for a few days. Do you want to go? There's no time to lose—yes or no?"

Serissa's voice ceased, but she remained on her knees with her face hidden.

"Are you going to hear her sing?" she asked.

"Yes."

"No—no. If it's wicked for her to sing it's wicked to hear her. No—no."

Meloon shut the door. For the next ten minutes his hands worked of themselves, apparently, for he could not think of what he was doing. Trooper and

Lotos came whining from the kitchen. He put a hurried hand on the head of each.

"Be good boys," he said, and as he hastened from the house he called out:

"Serissa, take care of the dogs."

The mare and the cutter came to the outer door just as Meloon flung it open. He saw a dog's face at each window of the kitchen as the sleigh sped off. Up on the hill a mile away he could look across the snow to the place where the light burned in his kitchen; seeing that light, he felt an impulse to return, and a misgiving as to what he was doing. Then he pulled the robes still more closely about him and laughed.

"Why shouldn't I hear an opera now and then?" he asked himself; and he laughed so that his companion remarked that he "didn't see notnin' to laugh at; and the glass 'd prob'ly be down about twenty below by mornin', if not more. Goin' to stay long?"

Meloon had taken a grip-sack with him, but he had not thought how long he should stay.

"A young fellow must have his fling now and then," he said, and he laughed again.

In truth, it seemed to him that he was no more than twenty years old. "Ah, it's a great thing to be young," he said, and he enjoyed his companion's perplexity.

The train was roaring far down the rails as he sprang from the sleigh with his bag in his hand.

"I may be back any day," he told his man; he tried hurriedly to think of something sensible to say before the train reached the station, and he managed to announce that he might find a good market for those winter apples; and "be sure and look well to the animals."

Then he was on the train, and it was taking him down towards Boston, and with every mile a year was whirling from his age.

"A man is only as old as he feels—that's a fine saying."

He turned back his coat in the warm car and took off his hat. He looked keenly at every face he saw, but there were not many passengers, and what there were had that sulky appearance of endurance which is so often characteristic of the railway traveller.

"They are not going down to hear an opera-singer," Meloon thought, "and they're mostly old fogies."

All through the journey, which lasted until nearly eleven that evening, Meloon gave free rein to his fancies, whatever they were; it might be judged from his sparkling eyes that they were pleasant. He never forgot that journey.

Arriving in Boston, he went directly to the hotel on Brattle Street where he used to come with his father, and by himself on his rare visits to the city. He slept every minute until daylight, and he rose and dressed with the same subtle and delightful sense of excitement controlling him. He stood before the glass and examined his clothes. He knew that they had a countrified look, and he was tempted to buy a dress-suit for the evening. He yielded to that temptation; then he shut himself in his room and dressed himself in these new garments, aware of a startled admiration for his broad shoulders and stalwart figure. He was never self-conscious, so he was not awkward.

"I suppose second childhood comes earlier with some than with others," he said, as he stroked his mustache in front of the mirror.

But though he spoke thus cynically there was no cynicism in his heart at this moment, only an enchanting gayety, that elixir of youth which some may quaff when youth is apparently over.

Meloon took off his new suit and carefully folded it. He drew out his pocket-book and examined his ticket for the opera that night. He had purchased this bit of pasteboard in the morning as soon as the box-office opened. Indeed, he had been leaning about in the vestibule an hour before a leisurely man had appeared at the office in a dilatory manner. Then Meloon found that a seat far back in the balcony behind a pillar was all he could have. No matter, he would go down and stand—rear seats and pillars had no terrors for him. And that hour of waiting for the ticket clerk had not seemed long, for there were the portraits of Wilhelmina Armstrong, nearly life size, one in the bridal white of the already distraught Lucia, the other in street dress.

Yes, that was Billy — that wild, rapt face above the white gown ; and this other was she also, calm, with a sort of courtesy of bearing that was very charming.

Meloon stood his ground, while men and women dropped in from Washington Street to look at the pictures and to buy tickets. He listened to their remarks.

"Every decent seat in the house gone for the week. I call that beastly mean. Oh, there's the Armstrong," stopping close to Meloon, and staring as well as the lighting of a cigarette would permit. "Fine, ain't she ? But that isn't half as fine as she is. Gad ! You ought to see her in 'Trovatore'—fetching now, I tell you. She—"

Here the two youths walked away.

"There she is now—I'm glad we have seats down front—I wouldn't go if I couldn't have an orchestra stall—do you think that looks like her? Prettier than she is—these photos do flatter so. Yes, I want a stall, or I won't go—then you can see Hildreth's eyes when he's singing love at her. Hildreth's just splendid—splendid. I always do wonder when I see them play together—I saw them twice in New York this season, you know—I always do wonder if she can help being in love with him. I couldn't, I'm sure. And I'm positive he's in love with her. There needn't anybody tell me that's all acting. Gracious! Just think of him in the tower! Who was it they called such a good lover, years and years ago, you know—was it Maurel? But it isn't possible for any one to be such a lover as Hildreth. Don't you think so? I wish this tall man would move an inch or two; I can't—"

"Hush!" from her companion. "Look there—close to us—it's the Armstrong herself! Ain't we in luck? She isn't as pretty as her picture, is she?"

The two girls pushed forward towards the sidewalk. Meloon stepped forward also. He stood there with head above the crowd, watching Billy as she walked slowly along. She glanced here and there, but rather absently, as one who did not see the faces near her. She was alone, and was dressed with scrupulous simplicity. She was thin and pale, but had not the slightest appearance of illness.

She had just passed by the entrance when she paused as if something drew her back. She turned and retraced a few steps, apparently being about to enter the vestibule. Meloon, hardly knowing that he did so, retreated into the dim interior. But he saw Billy glance in; he even fancied there was a wistful expression on her face as she did so. The next moment she turned quickly and went down the street.

XXIX

TYPE-WRITTEN LETTERS

MELOON hesitated an instant; then he pushed out among the people, and walked on slowly in the direction taken by Miss Armstrong. He was following her, though he would hardly have acknowledged the fact. Presently she turned into West Street, and then to the left on Tremont Street; here she paused and looked in at a window, but absently, and then she glanced rapidly and keenly about her as if searching for some one.

Meloon stepped beneath an entrance to a store, and was thus beyond the range of her vision. He could not have told why he did this; and he would have scoffed at the fact that these few trivial moments seemed freighted as if with the excitement of an adventure. Why, what adventure was it because he happened to see an acquaintance on a Boston street? Such a thing might happen at any time, and not stir his pulses in the least.

Was Billy looking for some one? It seemed so. For whom?

Meloon caught himself up for the fierceness with which he put this inquiry to himself, and his abundant but rather superficial cynicism came to his aid.

He thrust his hands into the pockets of his coat and forcibly withdrew his eyes from Billy, though not until he had seen her resume her walk up Tremont Street.

He stood staring across at the Common, the bleak winter wind striking hard upon him and seeming more chill than the breezes from the mountains at home. The reaction from his sudden journey had not yet come; he was still feeling the flow and the intoxication of the impulse, and his obedience to it.

Starting to cross to the Common, he felt some one take hold of his arm.

"Meloon! How are you! This *is* a surprise!"

The next moment he was shaking hands warmly with Hildreth, whose eyes, even in the instant of greeting, wandered off questioningly among the moving people, and the elder man said to himself: "She was looking for him."

Hildreth presented a nearly faultless appearance of handsome masculinity: freshly shaven, bright-eyed, perhaps too obtrusively well dressed.

"Been in the city long?" he asked.

"No—can't you see the hayseed in my hair?"

"Pshaw! There's no hayseed about you."

"There's certainly none about you, Hildreth. You're fine as silk. I don't believe you ever wore denim overalls and shovelled manure on the Meloon farm. You dazzle me. Do opera-singers look this way when they're let out on the streets?"

"Come, now, don't make fun of me. You were awfully good to me, Meloon. I can never be grateful enough to you. I was down on my luck then. Come to my room, and we'll have lunch together."

Meloon hesitated, but his companion put his hand through his arm and walked him to the Vendôme. Sitting down there in his own room, Hildreth offered a cigar, which was refused. He tossed it back into the holder and clasped his hands back of his head, stretching out his feet and gazing at them.

Meloon sat quietly, his strong face showing in singular contrast to the fine countenance opposite him.

"I can guess why you came down," Hildreth said, at last.

"I wanted to find a good market for a lot of russets—first-class apples for spring."

"Oh—eh!"

Meloon repeated his remark, and then smiled. Hildreth laughed, a trifle constrainedly. Meloon added that he was going to mix a little opera with his russets.

"I want to find out what kind of a tenor my hired man makes. I heard some girls saying just now that Hildreth was a better lover than—was it Maurel?"

Hildreth struck one hand down on the stuffed arm of his chair.

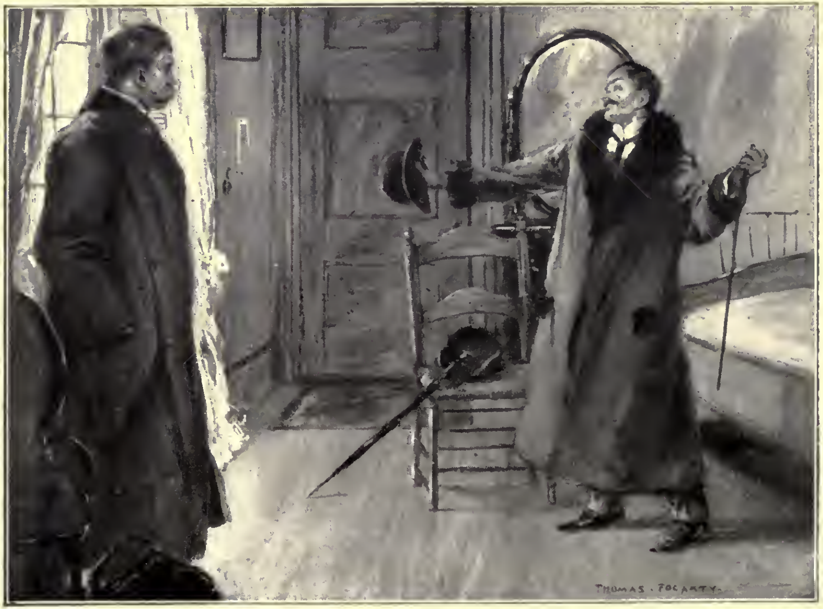
"Oh, damn it all!" he cried out. Then he hurriedly continued: "I hope you'll pardon me, Meloon. Of course I want the women to like me, but I wish they wouldn't write so many letters. Look at that"—pointing to a heap of envelopes on a table near—"those came since yesterday morning. I've only opened a few; but they all came from women. It's a bore."

"Be less attractive then. It's your only remedy."

"Don't laugh at me. Billy—Miss Armstrong—has more than that."

"And hers are all from men, I suppose?"

"No—the most of them, of course; but no end of girls fall in love with her and write to tell her so, and to beg an autograph—some want a lock of hair; and some implore a moment's interview, and permis-


THOMAS . FOGARTY.

"'YOU ARE LAUGHING AT ME, MELOON'"

sion to kiss her hand. She used to read every letter, but she doesn't now. Her maid reads 'em, and tells her what she sees fit."

Hildreth paused and looked somewhat abstractedly about the room.

"There's one odd thing, though," he resumed—and then he stopped again. He rose and sauntered to the window. He turned about towards his guest, who was watching him.

"The odd thing is that she has a letter every day from somebody who uses a type-writer."

"Lots of people use a type-writer," remarked Meloon.

"Oh, of course—of course. But if you were smitten with a *prima donna*, would you print your effusion to her?"

"I? Oh, it's hard telling what I should do. The commission merchant who takes my butter and hogs and maple sugar always sends type with the word 'dictated' in the top left-hand corner."

"Hogs?—butter?—but you are laughing at me, Meloon. I find I have the same inclination to confide in you that I had when I was up in New Hampshire on your farm. Now, to tell you the truth, I'm miserably, cursedly jealous of that type-written letter that comes every morning addressed to Miss Wilhelmina Armstrong. Yes, you may laugh at me if you want to — call me a jackass. You can't call me a jackass as emphatically as I call myself one."

"Perhaps these notes are solicitations from milliners and dressmakers for the custom of the *prima donna*," suggested Meloon.

"No; they're nothing of the kind. Billy has shown me the two or three that came first. I laughed at them."

"So did she, I suppose."

"Well—no. She was puzzled, but she took them rather seriously. She said there was a tone in them that appealed to her; she couldn't tell why. The first one was merely an announcement that the writer was so greatly interested in her that he proposed to spend an hour every day in communing with her. He said that he was, of course, attracted by her voice, but that, more than all, he was interested by what he assumed were her possibilities as a human being, and a woman. How is that for sheer brass?"

"The fellow must be made of brass. But why do you say he's a man?—why not one of those love-smitten women you mentioned?"

"Do you think there's a woman on the face of this globe that would use a type-writer for such a purpose? Women, even when they're fools, know better than that. Besides, internal evidence, you know. Oh, he's a man fast enough; and I'm kicking myself every day because I'm so weak as to hate him. I wouldn't mind if he kept his machine printing words every minute of his life if Billy didn't seem interested. I vow, I think she looks forward to 'em now. She doesn't show them to me any more. Bashy—that's my sister—says she reads those letters any time through the day—as a pious woman takes up her Bible, you know."

"How do they reach her?"

"By mail. But each letter is mailed in the town where our troupe is stopping; for instance, since we've been in Boston the envelopes are post-marked Boston, stamped the night before. Billy, wherever she is, has one of those notes for breakfast every morning."

Meloon began to laugh; he laughed with so much heartiness that one might almost have suspected the genuineness of such hilarity. So Billy was interested in those type-written epistles? There was mystery enough, and persistence enough, about them to catch the attention of any woman with a spark of romance in her, and most women of sensibility had that romantic spark in their composition. The man who had thought of doing such a thing would have a measure of success, perhaps; but Meloon believed that Hildreth was rather weak to be jealous. As for Meloon himself, it would be absurd, indeed, for him to be jealous about anything.

Hildreth scowled at his guest for laughing.

"It seems funny to you, does it?" he asked.

Meloon became outwardly grave.

"It does have a comical side," he replied; "but what are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing, since I can't find out who writes those things; if I could, you know I could take him and horsewhip him."

"Certainly; provided he wasn't bigger than you, and hadn't a stronger horsewhip. There's one great advantage, however, that you have over him."

"I don't see it."

"Why, you have the privilege of singing love to Miss Armstrong every night. I gather from what I overhear that you never fail to improve the occasion."

Hildreth was still moving restlessly about the room, but Meloon sat with apparent content in the chair he had first taken. The young man stopped in front of him.

"You can't blame me for that, can you?" he asked.

"Oh no; I'd do it myself in your place."

"You? By Jove! Meloon, I've often thought I'd give a great deal if I were as phlegmatic and steady-going as you are. And yet you lose a lot, too, you men of rock; but in the run of a life it's a gain to be rock instead of flesh and blood. I don't suppose you ever cared for a woman, now, did you?"

But Hildreth was too restless to be interested in any reply to his question. He flung himself into a chair by the window and gazed into the narrow park opposite.

"I suppose you'll hear us sing to-night?" he said, after a silence.

"Yes."

"I hope you have a good seat; if I'd known you were to be here, I'd have seen to that. If you'll stay, I'll give you tickets for the rest of the time."

Meloon rose. There was a tension upon him that he felt he would like to have relaxed.

"I'm all right as to that," he said, "and it's uncertain how long I shall stay in town; I may leave to-morrow, and," he went on, smiling, "I may be so bewitched with opera that I shall find I can't go while you are here."

Hildreth held out his hand. Meloon fancied there was something feminine in the expression of the young man's face as he looked at him; whatever the expression was, it made the elder man put his hand on his companion's shoulder.

"Since you're unhappy, why don't you throw up the whole thing?" he asked.

Hildreth gripped Meloon's hand; he laughed uneasily.

"Fine thing to say," he responded; "I tell myself that half a dozen times a day, but it's no use—I'm held. You don't know anything about it. And now

I'm tormented by the thought that if these infernal type letters hadn't come up, she might—you know—who can tell? She did once think she loved me; you see, I must dangle about, thinking she may love me again—or fancy that she does. But, look here, Meloon, you needn't think I'm whining to other people as I do to you. I'm whist. I could always talk to you. I told you at the first, you know."

"Yes, I remember."

Meloon wished that he could say something more, but he could think of nothing.

"Do you want to come behind the scenes?" asked Hildreth. "If you do, use this." He took a card from his pocket and wrote a few words upon it.

"Thanks. Don't tell Miss Armstrong I'm here; it's a notion of mine that she shouldn't know."

"All right. I hope you won't be disappointed in us to-night. I suppose you've heard opera before?"

"Yes—in Paris. Never happened to go in my native country," with a laugh.

"What! You been in Paris?"

"Yes, years ago. I was bound to go abroad when I was a youngster."

Meloon was buttoning his coat across his chest; Hildreth was staring at him. Then the young man declared that he might be knocked down with a feather.

"Brace up—brace up; don't be prostrated because you've found out that a New Hampshire farmer has been abroad. I'm not the only one."

"You got that Strad violin over there somewhere?"

"Yes. I'm off now."

Hildreth went to the elevator with his friend, and wrung his hand again as Meloon stepped into it.

When the lift had glided downward the young man stood about in the upper hall aimlessly a moment. He was still thinking of the fact that Meloon had heard opera in Paris, and he was still astounded by the knowledge. It was having a new window opened—he couldn't understand. "Why," he said to himself, "I thought he had never been even to Boston before, and as for New York—" he whistled and went back to his room.

Meloon, still yielding to his impulses, appeared at the theatre entrance before the doors were opened. He saw the placard: "Standing room only." He liked to be hustled about by the people; he liked the wavering brilliance of the electric lights. He went and looked at a picture of Hildreth as Lohengrin, and thought that he had never seen any man so beautiful, any masculine face so charming. He didn't wonder that the women fell in love with him. He thought in a confused way of what he had just been told about the type-written letters. And so Billy was interested in them? Women liked novelty and mystery.

By this time the doors were open, and Meloon passed in. He allowed the usher to conduct him to his back seat behind the pillar, and he sat down in it contentedly for the present.

XXX

AT THE OPERA

MELOON watched the people arrive; very slowly they came at first, but soon the rustle and the noise of the pushing down of seats were constant. The men of the orchestra crept into their places from that hole under the stage and presently began to play, but it is to be hoped that they had no expectation of being able to play down the talking and laughing all about.

At last the boxes began to fill with women, who threw back light-colored silk cloaks that their jewels might gleam unhidden, and who graciously allowed the men in the chairs behind to lean forward and hear what it pleased them to say.

Meloon felt as if he were in another world. He thought of his farm among those still, white mountains, and an added thrill of excitement went through him. Were the cattle fed and bedded down? Were the two dogs lying by the fire, and was Mrs. Armstrong sitting by the stand with the lamp and the open Bible upon it?

Which was real?—that farm or the scene before him now?

And Billy had said that if she lived she would come back for her dog. She loved her dog.

The outer curtain had gone up. Meloon rose with his top-coat over his arm, and made his way down to one of the outside aisles near the stalls; he could stand here, leaning against the wall, and he could see the expression of the faces on the stage. He had drawn off his gloves, the constriction on his hands was unpleasant to him; for the rest he was in proper evening costume, a tall, military-looking figure that drew inquiring glances. "Some general, be sure," said a woman near, after having examined him; "no man who hasn't been at least a general has a right to a mustache like that."

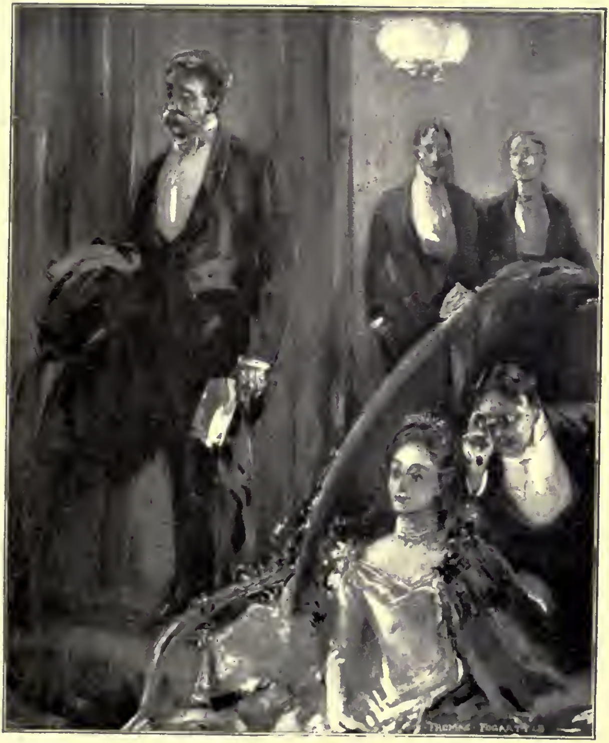
Meloon heard the remark, and his eyes sparkled as he glanced down at the speaker. It happened that their eyes met, and the woman blushed beneath the elaborate powder on her face.

The next moment the curtain had gone up, the orchestra had started on the music that accompanies that first chorus of soldiers, for it was "Il Trovatore" again. The officer was tramping back and forth across the stage, singing explanatorily, and his followers were joining in with vociferous monotony at the proper time.

Meloon knew the music, though he had never heard the opera. Nobody appeared to listen yet, though the aggressive chatter and laughter had ceased when the curtain went up.

Presently Meloon found that he was dreading the coming of Leonora. He was surprised at the strength of the impulse he felt to leave the place. But he did not leave; he walked a little farther down the aisle and leaned against the wall, in an attitude of endurance. Inwardly he was mocking at his weakness; outwardly he looked hard and rigid, not like a man who would be likely to enjoy an opera for musical reasons.

At last, there she was. He would have known it


THOMAS FOGARTY

"THE NEXT MOMENT THE CURTAIN HAD GONE UP"

was she by the ripple of satisfaction that went over the audience; but there was no applause. Meloon moved uneasily as he heard the first notes of her voice—a delicious voice, strong and true; he remembered it very well. She was evidently saving herself now, but as evidently she could not sing without something of fervor in the mere act of singing. Meloon was aware that opera-glasses were going up all over the house; but he needed no glass; he was tolerably near the stage, and his eyes were strong. Before the opera was half over he had succeeded in entirely ignoring everybody on the stage save Leonora and the troubadour; to their singing he listened, and when they were silent he shut his ears. The house was alertly applauding, happy to applaud, as is the case sometimes. Twice, thrice the curtain must be raised after each act, and Billy came a few steps forward, her eyes lowered, her chest heaving; or she was led by Hildreth, who bowed more to her than to the house, as if to signify that he also was doing homage to her; he managed to make this little play extremely expressive; and he looked really too handsome in that picturesque dress, with his face entirely undisguised and apparently not made up at all.

"Bright youth—winsome youth," thought Meloon, as he watched the two. "It 'll be a miracle if you don't succeed. You ought to score heavily against that mysterious type-writer."

He smiled and he pulled at his mustache. Everybody now was buzzing; a few late-comers followed ushers down the aisles and made rows of people get up and let them in.

"The tower scene is in the next act," said a young man standing near Meloon. "That's Hildreth's chance. If she's married to him, why does he keep on making love to her in this way?"

"Acting, you know," said his fellow young man.

"Acting? Bosh! I know the real thing when I see it. I wish I could get at the truth of the stories about those two. The Armstrong is—"

"Pardon me," said a slip of a youth in theatre uniform, pushing by the speaker with his eyes fixed on the man beyond him. "Are you Mr. Meloon?" he asked.

Meloon nodded. The two young men stared at him.

The boy extended a bit of paper, saying, "From Miss Armstrong."

The two young men stared enviously now, and openly nudged each other; but Meloon did not see them; he was reading the words on the bit of paper.

"I saw you, and, in my surprise, I almost tripped on a note. If I had tripped I couldn't have forgiven you. Won't you come behind the scenes? BILLY."

Meloon had decided that he would not use the open-sesame Hildreth had given him; he would not go behind the scenes. Why should he? He would take the first train in the morning, and hasten back to his farm. What did he want of opera?

You will see that the impulse which had made him start, and which had kept up its strength ever since, was beginning to wane. An impulse, even of this kind, must subside at last.

But now he thrust the paper into his waistcoat pocket and signified to the boy that he was ready to be conducted. He followed through some half-lighted places, which he did not notice at all until the boy knocked at a door and he heard Billy's voice say "Come in," and he opened the door and entered; and still he did not notice any surroundings, save that the room was small and much littered, and that the girl was in a clinging black robe and was deathly white; the next instant, however, he perceived that this white was make-up. She rose from a couch and came a step to meet him, holding out her hand.

XXXI

AN INTERVIEW

"WHY didn't you let me know you were to be here to-night?" Billy asked, abruptly, and then, before any reply could be made, she continued, hurriedly, "Mother is well?"

Meloon was holding her hand, which he dropped now as he responded:

"So you care whether she is well or not?"

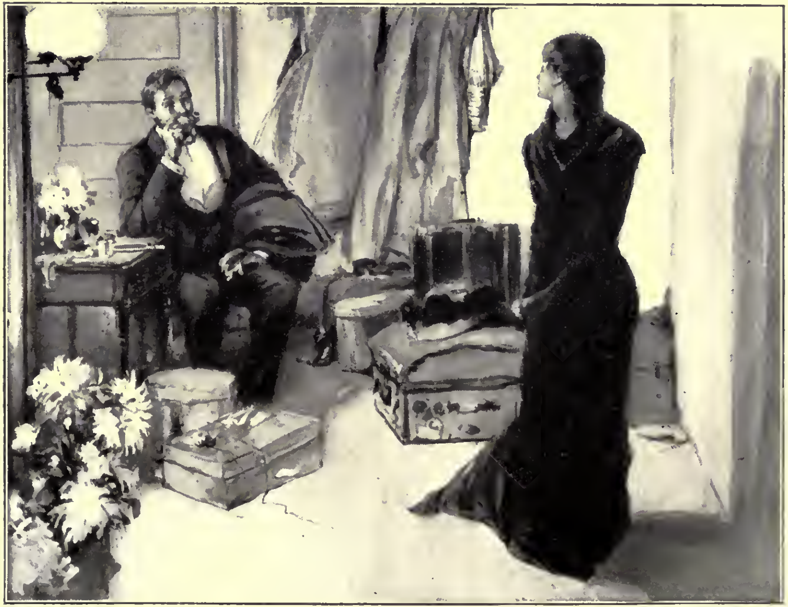
"Care? Yes, greatly. But surely I have a right to my career, and she is always praying to have my career cut off."

The words sounded hard, but they were spoken deprecatingly, almost pleadingly; and perhaps their effect was accentuated by the appearance of the speaker.

Billy glanced down at her dress and then at the mirror opposite.

"You needn't be alarmed at this ghastliness," she said. "I'm all ready to go and kneel down in front of that tower, and pour forth my love and life."

She laughed a little. She again struck Meloon as being somehow hard. He was looking at her, and he could think of nothing to say; the more frantically he tried to think of something, the more impossible such thought seemed. The principal thing in his mind was that very soon it would be time for her to go on the stage; it would be time, and yet he



"'YOU NEEDN'T BE ALARMED AT THE GHASTLINESS,' SHE SAID"

should not have said what afterwards he would wish he had said—not that he now had the least idea what that was.

"How is my dog?" she asked. "Is he well and happy?"

"Yes—well and happy."

"I'm glad of that." Then, more slowly: "I find when I think of Lotos—and I think of him so much—that I don't want him to be quite happy—without me."

Meloon smiled. Again he could not think what to say, and perforce remained silent.

"You call that meanly selfish, don't you?" she asked.

"I call it very human. Lotos has your wrapper to lie on—the one you wore those days before you left. When that is taken from him and he wants to lie down, he goes from your mother to me whining until we give it to him. Then he is content."

"Dear Lotos!"

Billy spoke just above her breath. At this instant she did not seem hard.

Meloon was still thinking of the moment when Leonora must appear on the stage. He said, hurriedly:

"I suppose you will end by marrying Hildreth again?"

Billy's appearance hardened instantly.

"End by marrying him?" she repeated. "I hope that such a marriage would not be an end, but a beginning. I'm in no hurry to marry, though. Mr. Meloon," rising, "who makes your butter now?"

"Sarah Jones, from the village. She comes twice a week. But honestly, she doesn't do as well as you did—she leaves some streaks of buttermilk in."

"I'm glad of it. That causes you to miss me."

Meloon made a step forward. He stooped and took her hand.

"Yes," he said, "that makes me miss you."

He was flushed, and his eyes were brilliant. He looked down at her hand, he turned it palm upward, and bent his head as if he were going to kiss that palm, but a light tap sounded on the door. He dropped the hand, straightened himself, and flung back his shoulders.

"It's time for Leonora," said Billy. "Can you find your way back? You know I love my mother; you mustn't think I don't." Then, hesitating: "Where are you stopping?"

He told her and she hurried off.

Meloon did find his way back, and took up his position in nearly the same place.

He had not suspected that Billy could sing as she sang the rest of her part. And, indeed, the papers said the next morning that she excelled herself, that she had never sung so superbly before; and the papers this time were correct. She never had done so well. She was aware herself of this fact.

The next morning, to his surprise, Meloon found on waking that his intention to go home immediately had faded greatly. But in order to keep up a semblance of it, he made a pretence of studying the time-table in reference to trains to New Hampshire.

While he was doing this, there was a tap at his door. A special messenger had brought him a note from Miss Armstrong:

"I should like to have you call on me if you are at leisure. A theatre dressing-room is a poor place, and I have so many questions to ask you."

Of course he went, on the very heels of the messenger, for he still had that indefinite plan of starting for New Hampshire by a later train.

Miss Armstrong was in her private parlor at the Brunswick. There was a girl sitting with her when Meloon entered—a girl with a great deal of hair and showy eyes, and a curious resemblance to Vane Hildreth. It was his sister Bashy. When Meloon was presented, she held out her hand with a certain boyishly frank way she had, and laughed, as she said:

"I ought to know you, Mr. Meloon"; then, explanatorily, "because I've heard Billy speak of you so often. I'm Billy's shadow lately. She thinks I'll go to the devil if she doesn't keep watch of me. We certainly must be great friends, Mr. Meloon."

She seemed to be amused about something.

Meloon smiled, but he did not share in the girl's amusement. He was glad to see her leave, as she did almost immediately.

"I suppose it is natural for you to be intimate with Miss Hildreth," he remarked.

He had not yet seated himself, for Billy was moving somewhat restlessly about the room. She had in her hand some sheets of paper, and Meloon saw some type-written words.

"It's one of those letters," he thought; "I suppose she has had a fresh one this morning."

He walked to a window, and stood there a moment looking into the street.

Presently he was aware that Billy was standing near him. He turned somewhat abruptly towards her.

"You don't look very gracious," she began; "perhaps I was wrong to send for you."

"Wrong? Oh no. I suppose I seem awkward;

you see, I'm an old farmer, and I'm out of place here with a *prima donna*. If you had never done housework for me, or had never become a *prima donna*—but the two—"

Meloon paused.

Billy had sat down near him.

"You didn't look like a farmer last night," she said. "I thought you might be some hereditary prince, or duke. I was quite awed."

"Thanks. You had never seen me in anything but denim jumper and overalls. My real appearance is that of a duke; you've just discovered that. One woman thought me a general—at least, I had procured a general's mustache somewhere. After this, how can I go back to that farm? I never dreamed of being such a success."

"Yes, I was dazzled."

Billy still held those sheets of paper; she had folded them carefully into a small compass. She raised her eyes to Meloon's face, but meeting his eyes, they glanced off again.

"Did I sing well?" she asked, abruptly.

Meloon hesitated.

"Then I didn't?" she cried, quickly, with an acute question in her voice. "I was mistaken. I felt that I was doing well. The knowledge that you were listening had a strange effect on me—it was like a spur—but a cordial spur—if you know what that might be. In fact, I sang for you after I saw you."

Having spoken thus hurriedly, Billy added, more deliberately: "I have always thought you an excellent critic."

Meloon leaned forward as he responded.

"I can't tell you how you sang," he began. Then all at once he resumed a stiff, upright position. His eyes wandered about the room. "You suited me," he said, coldly.

Billy dropped her eyes and began to twist the paper she held.

"I mean to sing as long as my voice holds out—that's my plan."

"I suppose you are happy in singing?"

"Happy? I don't know. It's wonderfully exciting—I love it. I won't give it up. I want you to tell mother that I love her, but I won't give up singing. But that isn't why I sent for you."

Here Billy paused. She rose from her chair and walked the length of the room and back again. Meloon rose also. The subtle excitement which this girl's presence produced had now something added to it. What was she going to say? Would she consult him about those letters? That would, indeed, be grotesque.

"I wanted to ask you what you thought about something," she said.

"I don't know that my opinion is specially valuable," he returned; "but perhaps you are going to inquire about the kind of soil suitable for timothy."

"Don't laugh at me, please!" Billy's voice was unsteady.

"Laugh at you? No—I'm laughing at myself."

And Meloon did laugh bitterly.

XXXII

TO REMEMBER

BILLY looked at him in a puzzled way.

"I know it's of no use to consult any one," she said, "for we really have to decide things for ourselves. All the same, we like to ask advice, don't we?"

Meloon nodded.

"It's about Vane—Mr. Hildreth—and me. He keeps wanting me to marry him."

She spoke like a perplexed child; she was watching her companion's face.

It was Meloon who now began to walk. But he only took one turn, and then he came back in front of the girl.

"Well?" he said; "and why do you hesitate? Half the people seem to think you are his wife already?"

"Do they?"

"Yes."

"I don't care for that. I wish I knew what to do."

"You know if you love him."

"How do I know? I'm fond of him in a way. He is very lovable."

"Is he?"

"He certainly is. Why do you frown, Mr. Meloon?"

Meloon drew his hand across his forehead.

"Am I frowning? I'm trying to think."

He evidently continued to try for a moment in silence. Finally he said, with an appearance of asperity:

"When a woman is fond of a man, she is willing to marry him, isn't she?"

"She may not be fond of him that way."

"Oh!"

"You don't seem to understand. I'm fond of him after a fashion, and he thinks he loves me, and shall love me forever." Billy paused to laugh, and she also laughed bitterly. "I think the marriage is advisable, because we are both of the same profession, and we can help each other. And I'm used to him."

"I see you've made up your mind," said Meloon.

"And you won't advise me?"

"Certainly not."

He looked about for his hat, found it, and walked to the door with it in his hand.

"Good-bye, Mr. Meloon."

Her voice went to his heart.

"Good-bye, Miss Armstrong."

He turned his face towards her, but he did not look at her. Then he opened the door and closed it behind him. He found his way to the elevator. As he stood there waiting its coming, Bashy walked quickly along the corridor and paused at his side. Whatever had amused her in Miss Armstrong's parlor seemed to be amusing her now.

"Mr. Meloon," she said, "you seem to me like a man who is blind with one eye and who can't see with the other."

Then she burst out laughing, and Meloon stared at her in perplexity.

"I don't know what you mean," he said, at last.

"No, of course you don't; if you did know, you wouldn't be so blind; but I can't talk to you and find understanding, too. I wouldn't have said as much as this only that I think you are an honest man and no fool. All the men I've known so far have been either fools or knaves. You don't seem to be either. The oracle has spoken." And she tripped away.

The next moment the elevator came noiselessly sliding up, stopped, and Hildreth stepped from it.

"Hullo, Meloon!" he exclaimed. "Aren't you making an early call?"

"It didn't strike me as early, and it can't be, since you're out."

Meloon looked anxiously at the bottom of the elevator, which had gone up farther. He was calculating the time when it would arrive on its return descent; he came immediately to the conclusion that he could not possibly wait for it, and then hurried off down the stairs.

Arriving on the street he stood undecided. He was now mocking at himself for having come to Boston at all.

"Egregious old fool!" he repeated over and over.

He strayed along down Boylston Street, with his hands in the pockets of his overcoat, his eyes wandering over the faces of the people he met. He felt as if, without ever having had anything, he had lost everything, and he was making great efforts to understand his state of mind.

He came to the old Public Library building, and saw that there were mammoth oxen on exhibition there.

"Oxen are in my line," he thought; "I'll go in and see them."

But the place where he paused was in front of the cage of the Bengal tiger. The animal was pacing back and forth, sometimes twitching the end of his tail. He gazed out through his bars, his face like beautiful striped thick-piled velvet. His yellow-brown eyes looked right into Meloon's, and a keen thrill of sympathy for the magnificent brute went through the man.

"You've missed your destiny, old fellow," he said, aloud; and he leaned on the iron bar and extended his hand. The animal snarled, and his white teeth flashed into sight.

"Don't you see he's marked dangerous?" sharply asked an attendant. "Besides, he's hungry. There's an awful lot of fools in the world."

"You're right, my friend," returned Meloon, cordially, "and I'm one of the biggest fools in the lot."

Then Meloon hastened down to his hotel on Brattle Street, and began to put his things into his travelling-bag. All the time he was doing this, he was asking this question: "What did that Hildreth girl mean? It seems to me that I'm not blind at all; it seems to me that I see with exceeding plainness. I can see straight on to the end."

Suddenly he dropped the handkerchiefs he had taken. He slammed the bag down on the floor. He stood up straight and flung out his hand, his face flushing deeply.

"Could she have meant *that?*" he cried, aloud.

He walked about the room. Presently he said, with resolution:

"I will find out." He took his hat. He paused at the door, and added, cynically: "I fully realize what a donkey I am, and the realization is such a comfort!"

He hurried back to the Brunswick. He had whiled away precisely four hours since he was there before. The servant was nearly certain that Miss Armstrong had just gone out with Mr. Hildreth, and he reluctantly went to make inquiries.

On the contrary, Miss Armstrong had just returned and would receive Mr. Meloon. He found her standing by the window. As she turned towards him he uttered an exclamation.

"Why do you cry out like that?" she demanded, giving him her hand as if she had not seen him a few hours before.

"You are so pale—you're as white as if you were Leonora, whose lover is to be killed."

"That's odd," she smiled, rather fixedly, "when the opposite is the case with me."

"The opposite?"

Meloon was still holding her hand, and doing so with an air that seemed to say that he would not relinquish it. Before she could reply he kissed the fingers he held—kissed them several times. If it were possible, she grew yet paler.

"What do you mean by the opposite?" he asked.

"I mean that my lover is not going to be killed; he is going to live, and live with me. You are very stupid, Mr. Meloon."

She withdrew her hand. There seemed something like terror in her eyes as she looked at him.

"And who is your lover?" he asked, in a dull way.

"You know very well."

"Hildreth?"

"Yes."

"He has just been here?"

"Yes. You know I asked your advice, Mr. Meloon; I sent for you that I might ask it; and I understand that—that—oh, Mr. Meloon, why do you look at me so?"

"I don't know how I'm looking at you."

Meloon felt his throat and tongue to be stiffening. In this woman's eyes he now saw something that explained clearly to him what Bathsheba Hildreth had meant when she had called him blind.

His superior age, his belief in what Billy's mother had told him, everything in reason had made him blind. But now some things in the past stood out brilliantly in a new light. He had, in his blindness, nearly trampled on his very life.

"Billy," he began. For the moment he could say nothing more; he could only look at her. He began again:

"Of course you've known all the time that I loved you."

"No—no."

She could not tell him what her mother had told her, and believed.

"You must have known it," he said, "and you tried to prevent my speaking—your whole attitude signified that you would not have me speak—that I was too old—but you hated to be obliged to tell me that—that you couldn't possibly do more than be sorry for me."

Meloon was now speaking very fast.

"However, all that is no matter now; all that is over. It is I who am your lover—if you'll let me be your lover. I was so old, you know, I dared not speak; and now I can never tell you strongly enough how I love you—how I love you." He dwelt on the words. It was wonderful how thoroughly he had forgotten that he was not a young man.

Billy stood leaning against the window-casing. Her eyes were still fixed on her companion's face.

"Could you love me a little?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, "I could love you with all my heart."

"Ah!"

As he uttered this exclamation he advanced a step, but she raised her hand.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" she asked. Her voice was husky.

"Why? Why? I told you. Your mother said you loved Hildreth—and then I was only an old farmer—"

Billy interrupted. "And I've been trying for more than a year to keep you from suspecting that —that—"

"That what?" with peremptory eagerness.

"That I loved you. No, don't come near. It's all horrible. I sent for you this morning. I was unwomanly, I suppose; but I wanted to ask your advice about Vane; I felt sure, if you cared for me, you would be obliged to say something—you said nothing—you seemed to advise me to accept Vane, or I thought so."

"You said you were fond of Vane."

"Yes, I know I said so; I am. I think I shall always be fond of him, in a way."

Billy seemed to speak with difficulty. She put out her hand, grasped the back of a chair, drew it to her, and sat down. She continued to look with a sort of helpless pleading at Meloon. As for him, he wondered what was the matter. To his mind everything seemed clear now, since they understood each other.

There came a knock at the door. Meloon made an impatient gesture.

"Send them away, whoever they are," commanded Billy, and he obeyed mechanically. He did not know why he felt so little exhilaration. What could depress him since he had heard her confession?

He stood looking down at her.

"Why do you stay?" she asked, presently; "why don't you go?" repeating her question.

He was more and more bewildered. What did it all mean?

"Is it that you're afraid I shall not want you to sing?" he asked, suddenly. "I couldn't expect that you would wish to give up your life work, just because you're a woman. I shouldn't oppose you."

"No, oh no, it isn't that," she answered. "It's something quite different. I find it very hard to tell you. I must seem very weak. You're altogether mistaken in me."

She stopped speaking, but she appeared to be trying to continue. There came an expression of positive agony to her face. She was very quiet, however, and held her hands closely pressed together.

Suddenly she raised her eyes to Meloon and smiled with a wistful brilliance.

"Then, after all, you do love me?" she said; "you love me, and I shall always have that to remember."

XXXIII

NO MORE UNCERTAINTY

"NO, you needn't come near me," Billy went on. "We're not going to be happy. I wish you wouldn't look as if we were going to be happy. I can't marry you. I wish you had told me long ago that you loved me. I don't understand it. As for me," pathetically, "I was occupied in trying to keep my secret. It seems that I kept it very well from everybody but Bashy. I'm sure that Bashy knows, though she has never spoken. I'm talking a great deal, am I not? Don't interrupt me. You and I won't talk together again, I think. I wish you wouldn't stand. There, sit down near me—must you hold my hand? Well, it will do no harm just this once—"

"This once!" ejaculated Meloon; "the hand belongs to me."

Billy smiled at him; then she raised his hand and kissed it, barely touching it.

"I've hoped that the time would come when I could tell you I love you," she went on, "but I didn't think it would. How I do dread to say what I have to say!"

She leaned back in her chair, gazing at him.

"I wonder if you'll despise me."

He made no reply. In spite of all she had said and looked, the inhibition in her manner was so great that he restrained his desire to speak. He felt very sure that presently he would be able to banish all her fancies; for they were fancies, of course. She was worn and tired with her exhausting work, and she did not see things as they were. He felt that with one brush of his powerful arm he could sweep away all the cobwebs.

"I wish it wasn't so hard," she said. Then she sat up straight. But she fixed her eyes on the hands that now lay folded on her lap.

"When you went away this morning," she continued, "Vane came. You met him, I know. I'm sure you can't understand the mood I was in. You had just made me think that you believed I might marry Vane; at least I was sure you didn't care for me, only in your kind, helpful way. Vane asked me again to marry him; he begged and pleaded. No matter what he said. He, at least, loved me. I couldn't doubt that. Suddenly I asked myself: 'Why not say yes?' Perhaps to be his wife would help me to forget some things. So I said yes. I—"

Meloon rose from his chair. He could sit still no longer.

"You can explain to him. He will release you—he will understand—"

"No; he can't release me," said Billy, "even if he would. We went out and were married. He had arranged so that it might be done immediately if he could get my consent. And I wished to be married privately. I don't want it known at present. Many people already think I am his wife. We shall go on much the same. It's a pretty story, isn't it? Oh, Mr. Meloon!"

For Meloon was at the door with his hand on the latch. He turned to say:

"Yes, it's a very pretty story. I will go now."

Billy rose and ran to his side.

"What!" she cried; "are you going like that?"

She put her hand on his sleeve, but she withdrew it instantly and stood gazing up at him.

"Certainly, like this. What other way is there?"

"But are you sure we are friends, Mr. Meloon? How could I live if I could not feel that you were friendly with me?"

It was a hard moment for the man. He was silent for a space, looking over her head through the window behind her.

He thought of several things he might say, things that would be excellent, and fine to remember when he recalled this interview, and he would be quite likely to recall it. But the difficulty was that he could not say one of them. He had never before quite known the full meaning of the phrase, "His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth."

As he could not speak, he turned the latch that he was still holding and shut the door behind him.

He walked rather blindly a few steps and paused as a voice in front of him asked, "Going down?"

It was the elevator man. Meloon entered the elevator, and when it stopped he walked very circumspectly out into the street, with that careful control of his limbs that a man sometimes exerts when he is partially intoxicated.

After a time he found that he was in the Public Garden and that the wind was sweeping roughly over the open space. He paused and fastened his coat tightly about him, trying to look at the people hurrying by him. Where were they all going? He wondered about that. And perhaps some of them were suffering. As for him, he could not tell whether this were suffering that he felt. There was a phase of exhilaration in it, as of fire. After all, Billy loved him; and he had been a blind fool. Well, he would be blind no longer; he would—here he stopped in his walk, his head bent down to keep the wind from blowing his hat off. Why, that couldn't be true that she had told him about having married Hildreth. Had she told him such a story? He would make sure, at any rate, and he could not trust his own memory. So he pushed his hat harder down on his head and hurried back to the hotel he had just left. He would not send up his name; he went to the door of Billy's sitting-room and knocked. He heard some one walking about within. He knocked again; the door opened quickly, and Bathsheba, in street dress, appeared. She was apparently going out, but she paused, staring at him. Suddenly she exclaimed:

"Oh, it's you, is it? Why don't you go away and hang yourself? Or are you too stupid to do even that?"

Then she went by him and disappeared along the corridor.

She had left the door open and Meloon entered. Now that he had come he was conscious for an instant only of a devouring desire to see Billy again. She came forward from the inner room.

Meloon advanced impetuously as she stopped in surprise. He took her in his arms and held her as he whispered some words which he never dared to recall afterwards.

For the first instant she did not withdraw herself, but it was only for an instant. She stepped back and leaned a hand on the table.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, under her breath, "don't do anything that will change my idea of you."

Meloon was silent. He was trying to make out clearly why he had come back. Then he said:

"I wanted to be sure; I wanted to make no mistake. After I had left you and had walked about, it began to seem as if it couldn't be true; that I hadn't heard rightly. I'm so stupid, you know—a stupid old farmer."

He smiled and raised his hand to his forehead, looking at her.

"Oh, Mr. Meloon," she cried, "are you ill?"

"Ill? Not the least in the world. Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"That you are married to Hildreth?"

"Yes."

Meloon put his hand to his head again.

"And there's something else. It's true that you love me?"

"Yes."

Meloon said nothing more. He turned away directly, and a half-hour later he was in his room on Brattle Street, sitting on the side of his bed "adjusting himself," as he called it. And he needed a great deal of adjusting, he found.

He had let the one thing he most wanted slip away from him; and he couldn't see now that he had been to blame.

There was nothing left for him but to go home and bear it. He supposed there must be some manly way of bearing things; perhaps he could find that way.

He did not know how long he sat on the bed with his face in his hands, but at last he rose and began to put the few things he had brought into his bag. No more city and no more opera for him. The town had already begun to stifle him. He wanted a long breath of the air that blew down through The Notch.

Just as he was turning the key in the lock of his gripsack, steps hurried up to his door, and then there was a quick knock.

XXXIV

A SAVING GRACE

MELOON hesitated. He felt that there could be but one person who would come to his room, and that person it would be hard to see. He drew his hand down over his face and called out, "Come in," forgetting that the door was locked. Then he hastened to pull back the bolt, and Hildreth sprang in like a boy whose spirits are at their highest, and who must share them with some one. He held out his hand and shook Meloon's hand violently; his face was glowing, his eyes sparkled. He threw open his fur-edged overcoat and began to pace about the bit of a room.

"I was awfully afraid I shouldn't be able to find you," he began. "I felt that I must see you, old fellow. I simply couldn't have you go without telling you—though it's a secret—from the public, you know—without telling you that she's my wife. We were married to-day. Jove! I can't believe it! I feel as if I were drunk on something—some brew that never was tasted before by mortal. I say, old man, let's shake again."

He caught Meloon's hand for the second time, and swung it up and down.

"Mind, it's a secret, you know—don't go telling it to the newspapers. It mustn't get out. Things are to go on just as they are for the present, Billy says.

I'm bound to respect her wishes, of course. But I declare I feel as if it were written all over me, and that everybody 'd know. I'm the happiest man in the world. I hope I can keep my head when I sing with her to-night. I'd like to sing better than I ever did in my life, but very likely my voice 'll all go to smash. Do you think it will?"

"How can I tell?"

Meloon was leaning with his back to the window, his hands thrust into his pockets, watching his companion as he moved hurriedly here and there.

"Hope you'll stay to hear and see—eh?"

"No, I'm going home."

Meloon drew out his watch.

"Sorry to turn you away," he went on; "but I haven't any time to lose if I catch my train."

"Is that so? Too bad. I say, aren't you well?"

"Perfectly well; not used to late hours, I suppose."

"Very likely," was the response from Hildreth. "I say, let me go to the station with you. I'll run out and get a cab."

And he did go. He could not stop talking of his happiness.

"Mind you," he said, as he sat opposite Meloon, "I'm not speaking to any one else like this; I'm bottled up tight, except to you. Good heavens! Do you suppose any other man was ever so happy?"

"Scores of them," was the response.

Meloon had drawn his coat collar as high as it would go; he wished that he had something to shield his eyes from the horrible brilliance of the face near him. He was calling himself a monster because a pang of hatred shot through his heart. He thought of flinging open the carriage door and tossing out, under the trampling feet of horses, this insolently happy man, who had what did not belong to him.

Under the stress of this thought Meloon sat rigid. He heard Hildreth's words, and comprehended them with some especial sense of which he was hardly cognizant. And all the time that beast within him was ravening for Hildreth's life. Why should Hildreth have what didn't belong to him? That was the phrase that repeated itself so persistently in Meloon's mind that he began to be afraid of it.

"I'm so glad you happened to be down here," Hildreth was saying. "You've been such a friend to me when I needed just such a lift as you gave me. I never shall forget it of you—never. It's a god-send, too, to know such a man. I hope you don't think, Meloon, that I'm careless, or shall forget."

Hildreth leaned forward and put his hand on his companion's knee.

"I wish you'd drop all that," said the other, roughly.

"What—eh?"

Hildreth shrank back, and the color mounted to his forehead.

"I mean," went on Meloon, hastily, "that you owe me nothing. You exaggerate, that's all. Here we are at the station. Good-bye."

"But I'm going in; I'm bound to see the last of you."

Hildreth jumped out and took Meloon's bag.

In a moment the two were walking along the platform. The elder man had begun to feel that he should never be alone; a hot hand seemed to have seized his brain, and it was holding and compressing it. He looked sideways at Hildreth; withdrew his eyes; then looked again. Why should Hildreth have what did not belong to him?

Without thinking where they were going, the two walked far down the platform. Meloon's only distinct thought was the question as to when he should get rid of this young man who was so outrageously flaunting his happiness before him.

"Billy and I will go up to the farm in the summer," he heard Hildreth say; "there's nothing I should like so well—and Billy's mother is there. You'll let us come, won't you? And Lotos, dear old dog! Is that engine coming up on this track? Shall we run across? We're in the wrong place here, anyway. How did we get here? I wasn't minding; were you?"

"We'll cross—there's time enough," said Meloon, sharply. "Go ahead!"

As he spoke he gave the young man a slight push. The engine was coming up with an implacable calmness. It is wonderful what may happen in a breath of time. Somebody on the engine shouted. It seemed as if Meloon pulled back Hildreth with the reflex action of the movement which had impelled him forward.

The hot steam swept on them as they staggered and fell on the platform. The same voice that had shouted, cried out now:

"Good God! Are you fools?" The engine and its cars went on. People ran up to the two men, who had risen directly to their feet.

"No harm done," said Meloon, and he stooped to brush the dust from his pantaloons.

The people scattered again.

"I thought we could get across," said Hildreth. "That was rather narrow, wasn't it? Ugh! It doesn't make a fellow feel good to scrape quite so close, does it?"

He was ashy white, but his voice was steady.

Meloon opened his mouth as if to speak, but he closed it again without a sound. He looked hard at Hildreth. The latter continued immediately: "Come on, we must get round somehow, or you'll miss your train. Stupid of us to come here."

In two minutes more Meloon was sitting in the right train and Hildreth with a hand on the back of the seat was leaning over him, saying quickly:

"We shall be sure to get up to the farm in the summer. There's no place in the world I love so well. Take care of yourself, old fellow. You've been a friend. There, you're off. Good-bye."

The cars had given that preliminary lurch in response to the shout of "Board!" from the outside. Hildreth ran down the aisle, knocking against some one that was coming in; then he swung himself off as the train gained impetus, and ran on by the car, looking up at Meloon and waving his hat at him.

Meloon nodded his head; then the train slid along out of the station, and the man settled back in his seat and drew his hat far forward over his eyes. He remained thus for what he thought was a long time, until the conductor had been on his first trip. As the man punched the ticket and tucked it in on the top of the seat in front, he glanced at Meloon's face. He went on, but before he left the car he came back, glanced a second time at Meloon, and then, as if impelled by something, he touched the man's arm, and asked:

"Are you sick? Anything I can do?"

Meloon moved impatiently.

"I'm well."

"All right."

The conductor passed on. At the door he met the brakeman, and said:

"That fellow with the hat drawn down over his eyes looks as if he had just seen the devil."

"I know it; I noticed him. Hope he won't wreck the train."

The two men laughed and separated.

After a while Meloon rose and went into the smoker, not to smoke, but he felt an imperative need of moving.

The air was blue and thick; some of the men were playing cards; nobody seemed to look at the man who stalked through and back again, save that one young man shuffling a pack of cards raised his eyes and gave a short laugh, before he said:

"That feller looks like a regular nightmare."

Meloon used afterwards to try to remember that journey, but he could never recollect anything distinctly, save the instant when he had pushed Hildreth towards the engine. The fact that he had almost simultaneously pulled him back was blurred in his memory.

The impulse to destroy what stood in his way kept fresh in his mind; it revealed an abyss in himself which terrified him, and which in a way seemed as alien as if it had been a glimpse which he had had into another man's soul. Over and over he asserted that it was impossible—he could never have done such a thing.

In due time he reached the village, where he left the stage. A neighbor offered him a seat in his cutter; but Meloon said he would walk. He knew that he could never listen to that man's talk; and he had a strange feeling, deep down in him somewhere, that he might tell that he had just tried to push a human being in front of a locomotive. It was true he had pulled him back; he had been given time to do that —time and a saving grace. At this latter clause Meloon mocked.

It was not a pleasant thing to have a man's life stand between you and happiness.

XXXV

WITH TROOPER

MELOON did not go across the fields. He let his neighbor drive on ahead in his cutter until he was out of sight in the vivid color of a brilliant afternoon. The unbroken snow emitted a white glow. The mercury was five below zero, but there was not a breath of wind.

Meloon strode forward over the creaking snow, his breath making a vapor in front of him, bits of ice gathering on his mustache. A mile or two away, in this direction and that, on hill-sides, but usually in valleys, here and there, were little farm-houses, with columns of smoke going straight up into the air. Sometimes these houses were painted white, but the white showed dingy against the snow. The stretches of firs and pines were blue black; only the erect boles of the birches seemed white even on a day like this.

Meloon knew that there would not be a house on this road for the distance of several miles, and he was glad of it. He reckoned that this air would sweeten and clarify his thoughts; he felt as if he were throwing his soul open to the pure strength of the atmosphere. How could there be in this world two places so different as this New Hampshire country and that city which he had just left?

A rabbit started up and went across the narrow road; at the opposite side it paused an instant on its haunches, eyes protruding, ears erect, then fled away beneath the trees. Meloon stood motionless, watching; and the sight soothed him. Off on the hill at his right he heard the short, sharp bark of a fox. All around on the snow of the open field at his left were the marks of birds' feet and of winter creatures—squirrels, rabbits. The man stopped to gaze at these footsteps.

His pulse beat less turbulently. Though he was not young, and ought to have known better, he took heart of grace, and actually believed that this emotion of calm was but the presage of healing. The odor of the New Hampshire winter was in his nostrils, and he flung up his head that he might breathe still more deeply.

"I'll begin to lead a sane life again," he said. "To plod on here in the country—to read—to play my fiddle—to have all emotion expend itself on my dog and my horses—better still, to do without any emotion—ah," another deep breath, "I shall pull myself together yet."

He went on steadily for a mile, his courage and his hope rising every moment, even conscious, in the stimulation of this atmosphere, of a quiver of animal spirits. Then he turned a curve in the downward road, and stopped short. He had been dreading this place, and yet, at the same time, that he might come here alone had been one of his reasons for declining the offer of a seat in the cutter. Straight away at his right he could see his own house.

It was here that he had shot the bear, been thrown from his carriage, and here that Billy had found him. She had been kind—divinely kind. She had loved him. He could look back and see everything illuminated by the light that had come too late. But he had been blind then; still even now he did not wonder at his blindness. It had been fate leading him —or had it been God? Did he need more discipline in life, and was this God's way of dealing it out to him?

All at once, as a newly come light snow is shaken from a tree by a gust of wind, the sight of this place, and the memory of Billy's voice, as she had come to him here, shook from him all of that shallow belief in the retrievement of himself which he had felt a moment before. In an instant he was unmanned. Heart and soul cried out for this woman who loved him and whom he loved. A demon of a wish darted through him—a wish that, having pushed Hildreth towards death, he had not pulled him back. Why had he saved him? Let that man be careful and not come in his way again. From a man with high aspirations, Meloon became a furious animal whose mate has been torn from him. It was as if he had fangs and claws with which to destroy. When he recalled how Billy had said, "I love you," but a few hours before, he could have gnashed his teeth. His eyes burned. Everything about the whole affair was maddening. That he should have visited the girl at her hotel and should not have spoken—even then it was not too late; but when he had gone back she told him she had just married Hildreth. Then he was as much too late as if years had passed.

Still he must bear everything; somehow, well or ill, he must bear everything; and like a man, not like a beast. These words, though they passed through his mind, had no apparent effect upon him.

He sprang along down the road, between the banks of snow. He had a fancy that he was like a brakeman who tries to make the brakes take a grip on the speed of the wheels. Perhaps, if Meloon had been younger, his nature would have been more pliable.

"There are a thousand things to live for," he cried. "How has the world changed since before I saw her? It has not changed by a hair's-breadth; I'll get comfort out of it yet. I won't be defrauded because I've met that girl."

Far off, down below, he heard a dog bark. The sound came sharply in the still air. That was Billy's dog. Very well, he would shoot Billy's dog; he wouldn't have the creature about where he could see him.

She had said she would surely come for him. Let her come! He would tell her that there were some things that he could not endure—a man could not bear everything—and Lotos was one of those things. Then she would grieve, but he could not help that; she must grieve. It would be Hildreth's place to comfort her when she was sorry. Here Meloon shut his hands hard; but he opened them again, flung them forward and outward, and laughed loudly.

He was walking fast all the time, and now he was not more than half a mile from his home. He would presently be at the gate that led into the lane. He had met no one; he had some luck left, then.

A shape was galloping up among those scattering pines and birches—a tawny bulk that loped in long reaches over the snow, that jumped a wall and tumultuously threw itself upon Meloon, eager tongue and breath going warmly over the man's face. It was Trooper, half crazed with joy.

Meloon knelt down on the snow; he put his arms about the dog and pressed his face on the thick yellow hair of his neck. Something seemed to break in him, and the man began to cry and sob like a child.

XXXVI

AT HOME

AFTER a few moments Meloon rose to his feet, the dog keeping close to his legs and whining in a joyful tremolo. The man hardly knew what had happened to him. He could not remember when tears had fallen from his eyes before. He had never had much sympathy with human beings who were mere "vessels of emotion." The fury of his mood was quenched. He walked on slowly, but without pause, down the lane, the dog at his heels.

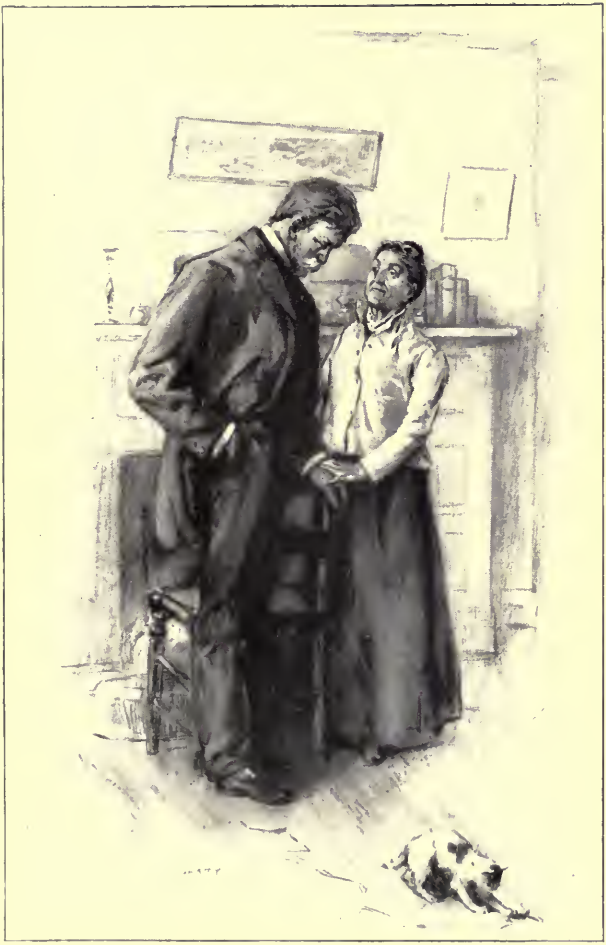
Mrs. Armstrong had seen him ; the door from the kitchen was flung open, and she appeared with her apron drawn up about her shoulders. Lotos dashed out by her, nearly knocking her down.

"Hullo, old fellow!" called out Meloon, cheerily. "There's nothing like a dog for a welcome. Is there, Serissa?"

Then he was shaking hands with his housekeeper, and she was looking at him nervously as she asked:

"What's the news, Rawdon? Have you seen her? I didn't know when to expect you. I've been all in a heap in my mind ever since you went. Have you seen her? I s'pose you're hungry as a bear, ain't you?"

Meloon was standing in the kitchen gazing about him. It seemed a year since he had been in this room. He began pulling off his overcoat.



"'WHY, RAWDON, IS ANYTHING THE MATTER?'"

"Oh yes," he replied, "I've seen her. More than that, I've heard her in opera. You've no idea how glorious she is. What have you got for supper?"

"Oh, I know. She isn't like any one else, I'm sure. Is she well?"

Mrs. Armstrong was twisting her apron in her hands. At this moment she looked small and old, and somehow very pitiable. It occurred to the man that Billy was careless and hard; that she trampled on much that was sacred that she might reach what she sought. And then he asked himself, had her mother a right to stand between the girl and her vocation?

"Well? Oh yes, in fine condition."

Meloon leaned forward and spread his hands towards the fire, for the two had now gone into the sitting-room. He was getting himself ready to tell of her marriage. The next instant he blurted out:

"She has just married Hildreth."

"Oh!" cried the woman; "and she didn't write to me."

"You're glad of it, aren't you?" roughly. "I fancy 'twas very sudden—in fact, she said so. You approve, I know."

"I always did think she loved him, from the first. I told you she did."

Meloon raised his head and gazed at his companion with a questioning intentness. At last he drew in his breath slowly and said:

"Yes, I remember you told me that, and I believed you."

"Why, Rawdon, is anything the matter?"

Meloon withdrew his eyes and smiled.

"Nothing," he answered. "The marriage is to be a secret from the public at present. Did you tell me what you have for supper? I'm starving. It's hungry business, this opera-going."

When the two were at the supper-table Meloon began making inquiries about the animals. Had Tom Dowd, the one hired man for the present, done all that he ought? After a time Mrs. Armstrong noticed that he did not remember her replies, and repeated his questions; and he did not eat. There were many things that she wished to ask, but she could not. She wondered why she felt frightened. She sat staring over her tea at the master of the house, who made a pretence of eating copiously, and who laughed a great deal as he talked, his eyes shining. Mrs. Armstrong wished that Tom Dowd were going to stay there that night, as he had been staying since Meloon's absence, but Tom had gone home down the valley, after having done the chores.

At last, at ten o'clock Mrs. Armstrong went upstairs to her room, leaving Meloon sitting by the fire.

She could not sleep. After the clock had struck twelve she heard the playing of a fiddle below, a fiddle giving forth gay, jinking tunes, as if the brain that guided the bow hand were half drunk.

She bore it as long as she could; then she rose, shivering in the keen air, dressed, and went downstairs.

Meloon did not hear her come in. He was standing before the fire with his violin at his shoulder, his head bent as he sang to it. The woman softly closed the door behind her and stood listening. She knew very well what the song was; she had sung it in her youth, and now the remembered notes slipped down into her heart, making it beat with tender reminiscence.

"Weep no more, lady, weep no more,
Thy sorrow is in vain;
For violets plucked the sweetest showers
Will ne'er make bloom again.

"Sigh no more, lady, sigh no more,
Men were deceivers ever;
One foot on sea and one on land,
To one thing constant never."

A pause, and then, monotonously, with an undertone from the violin:

"All things are transient;
They being born must die,
And being born are dead;
And being dead are glad
To be at rest."

"So that's the way people felt twenty-four centuries ago," he said.

As he finished, the player became aware that he was not alone. His violin swung down in his hand and he turned about quickly. But he spoke gently.

"You are her mother," he said.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "I wish I had had Tom stay here. You frighten me, Rawdon Meloon. You ain't like yourself. What do you mean by I'm her mother?"

"What do I mean? Why, just that. I was thinking of Billy. You know I've just seen and heard her in opera, and my mind runs on the memory. You've no idea how magnificent she is. And now she is Hildreth's wife. He's beside himself with happiness."

"I hope she'll write to me all about it," said the mother.

"Oh, of course—of course. She does write often now, you know."

"Yes, so she does; but somehow—"

"Somehow what?"

"She seems so far away."

"You didn't expect she was going to stay here on this farm, did you?" he asked.

He put his violin under his chin again; but he did not play.

"What makes you so strange?" she asked.

Meloon turned upon her.

"Go back to bed again," he said, quickly. "As for me, I'm going to have a wake. I can't sleep. I'm going to stay up with the dogs. Good-night, Serissa; or rather, good-morning."

He walked to the door, opened it, and held it for her as she passed through.

She paused on the other side of the threshold.

"I never was so well in my life," he said, "nor so gay. I have a thousand things to think of. I shall have thought of them all before daylight, and then I'll settle down again."

Mrs. Armstrong did not want to leave him alone, but she was obliged to obey. She thought she heard him chuckling to himself after he had closed the door upon her. She hurried up to bed and pulled the clothes over her ears, and presently she fell asleep, to her great surprise when she thought of the matter the next day.

Long before light in the morning she heard Meloon shut the outer door, and then the squeaking crunch of his footsteps towards the barn. A moment later the deep bay of Trooper sounded in the lane.

Mrs. Armstrong rose and pulled the curtain aside; she saw a tall, dark figure swinging a lighted lantern;

the light gleamed on a milk-pail. She drew a long breath of relief, and hurriedly dressed. When Meloon came in with his first pail of milk, Mrs. Armstrong held the light while he strained it into the pans she had placed. The cat was purring and rubbing at his feet. She looked apprehensively at his face—it was just the same as it used to be.

Yes, as the days followed one another now, he was just the same as before his visit to Boston ; so Serissa gratefully told herself. After a time she noticed that his violin was put away, and that he never touched the piano. He and Tom Dowd went into the woods and began logging. They were up in the starlight of the bitter February mornings ; and she was up also to get their breakfast, and to put up great pieces of bread and meat and big doughnuts for their dinners in the woods. Daylight had not come when they went slowly off over the snow, each man walking beside his pair of oxen, the sleds slipping along behind, the dogs careering over the crust of the snow. Sometimes, up the slope of a hill, she saw the shadowy form of a fox flit like a spectre ; and once she saw a larger, more clumsy object going slowly, and that night the men at the supper-table told of having seen the track of a bear.

Meloon ate as usual ; he talked, he laughed ; he was, perhaps, a little more gentle in his manner. Mrs. Armstrong settled it in her own mind that, in some curious way, her friend had been improved by his visit to Boston.

In the evenings he sat dozing in his chair, or sometimes he talked a little of logging with Tom Dowd, who dozed in his chair. They planned to get out "pulp-wood" for the pulp-mill.

Every week now Mrs. Armstrong had a letter from her daughter—brief the epistles were, but they told of her travels, and, in a general way, of her welfare. She was singing in the principal cities, and success attended her everywhere. In the first note after Meloon's return, she said: "I was married to Vane yesterday. On the whole, I thought it best." And after that she never mentioned him. Once she wrote that Bashy was with her, and that she didn't know what she should do without Bashy.

At first Mrs. Armstrong used to read these epistles to Meloon, but it seemed to her as if he did not listen, and he never made any comment, so she ceased. She often wished that it had happened that Meloon had felt more interested in her daughter.

The time went by swiftly, for all its monotony, and as the days lengthened the cold strengthened, until it was as if the whole earth were frozen and cracking in the icy air.

Then—was it suddenly, or did it only seem so?—there was a softness, a smile in the heavens; the snow had gone save at the north of hills, and walls, and houses; the roads were deep with mud; "the doing," as the neighbors said, "was just awful." It was sapping-time again, and Meloon and his hired men were up at their hut among the maples. Sometimes they brought down sap for Mrs. Armstrong to boil on the kitchen stove, but that was rare.

To Meloon it had always been as if there were an enchantment in the world when sapping-time had come round; anything beautiful might happen then, when the universe was renewing itself.

He liked to be alone at the hut in the sugar orchard; he liked to tramp about with his bit and his basket of spiles and select the trees, while the dogs nosed among the sodden leaves, and the birds made choice of mates and homes.

That is, in former years this used to be a charmed season for him, and even now his heart softened in some strange way with the softening sky.

Yes, anything beautiful might happen.

He was standing in the door of his hut; the dogs had gone down to the house with Dowd. The morning sun was sending brightness among the bare tree-branches and shining in the man's eyes so that he did not at first believe in the reality of the figure walking up the cart-path towards him; for the figure seemed to be that of Wilhelmina Armstrong.

XXXVII

FRIENDS

PERHAPS the form was but a shape projected from Meloon's mind, and he was in reality losing control of his brain.

There was Billy in velvet and silk, coming lightly up the path; and Meloon stood still and watched her. When he had first caught sight of her she had been gazing about her, her face solemn, but with a great eagerness upon it. Now she was looking straight at him; she was pale, though she was walking, and her eyes were intent. Meloon could not help thinking that she moved easily, like a ghost; then a terror went through him; was she dead, and was this her wraith?

She came close to him and held out her gloved hand; he took the hand, and the two stood a moment looking at each other.

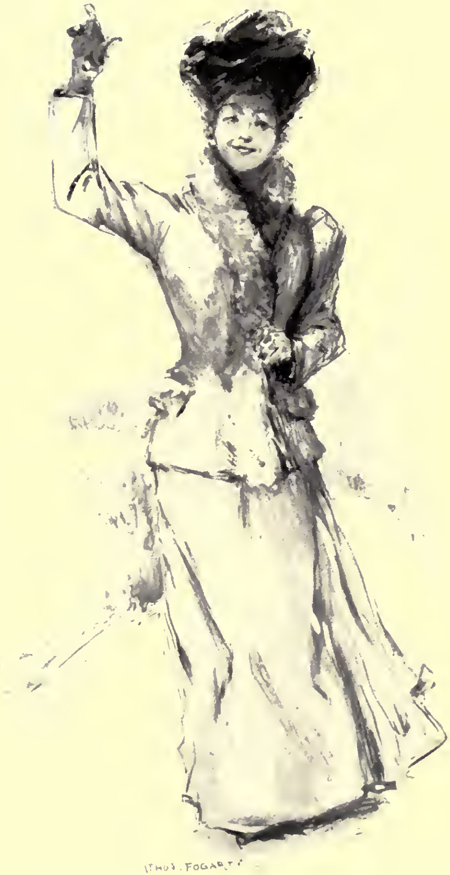
Then Billy withdrew her hand and glanced about her; she drew in the moist odors of the wood and the moss in a long breath.

"It's all just as I've remembered—just the same," she said.

Her voice was low; it was perfectly steady; and yet it was very pathetic.

"You have remembered it, then?" Meloon responded.

Billy leaned against the door-frame; the two were near to each other.


THOS. FOGARTY

"NOW SHE WAS LOOKING STRAIGHT AT HIM"

"Oh yes," she answered.

She had put her hands together in a way her companion recalled—a way that somehow was suggestive of restrained ardor; but Billy was extremely quiet.

"I couldn't help coming here before I went," she said. "I must see mother—and all this," her eyes sweeping about her, "and Lotos."

"Where are you going?" asked Meloon.

She continued to gaze out into the wood as she answered:

"Hadn't you heard? We sail for England the day after to-morrow."

"No, I hadn't heard."

Presently Meloon went into the hut and carefully stirred the boiling sap, bending his head down over the steam that arose.

Billy kept her place, but she turned to watch her companion.

"There was another reason, too, why I had to come," she said.

Meloon came back to her.

"Another reason?"

He looked at her coldly, but he was thinking wild thoughts. He was wondering why all of womanhood should seem concentrated in this slight girl whose rich garments exhaled a perfume that he did not like, because to him it resembled the breath of the opera—but that thought was incoherent, and he did not wish to be incoherent; he particularly wished to keep his mind clear and cool, for he foresaw that this interview might be trying, more and more trying as the moments should pass.

"Yes, but it is hard to tell that reason; I shall have to wait; I can't speak of it yet."

The two stood silent for some time, both gazing at the trees. Finally Meloon asked:

"Did you come alone?"

"No; I never go anywhere alone in these days. Vane and Bashy are at the house. I wouldn't let them come up here; they were willing not to come—they didn't want to climb the hill. I knew the way so well. Do you remember that I used to bring your lunch last sapping-time?"

"Yes."

"Of course it isn't time for you to forget yet. I thought it was beautiful as I walked up the path. And I never get out of breath. I wish Lotos were here. He wasn't at the house. Mother was glad to see me—and she kissed Vane, too. But she doesn't like Bashy. I believe that she thinks that Bashy will contaminate me."

Billy laughed in a way her hearer did not like; but he made no response.

"You have no idea how popular I am," she said.

"Yes; I sometimes read the papers. I hope you like it."

"Certainly; it is what I live on."

"Perhaps you couldn't live without it now."

"Perhaps not; but I don't mean to try. I take care of my voice as a miser takes care of his gold. I have decided that if my voice leaves me, or if I get too old to sing, I'll put myself out of the way—get some nice, sleepy poison and take it. No, I wouldn't live without my singing voice. I often think of Miss Runciman, and I pity her as I never did pity her in the old days. But then she grew pious, you know. As for me, I shall never grow pious," with another light laugh.

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that."

"Why not?"

"Because it hurts me; and it isn't like you."

"It's like me"—a slight pause—"but I don't want to hurt you."

Another pause, and then she said:

"Perhaps you don't know what is like me. I used to have a strange fancy that you did know, but that was when I had fancies. It is lovely and still here—but will the workmen stay away much longer?"

"Yes, a little longer."

"I'm glad of that. I like to be with you, Mr. Meloon. I have the weakness to feel sure of your friendship."

She was perilously frank—or she had that appearance; but then frankness is often a great safeguard.

Another silence now fell upon the two; they heard the soft rustling of the twigs in the tops of the trees, and within the hut the muffled sound of the boiling sap.

It was Billy who broke the silence.

"I'm not mistaken, am I? You are my friend?"

"Yes, I'm your friend."

"I'm glad. I find that's what I care most for in these days—that you should be my friend—that and my singing. I'm getting very hard. If I live to be forty people will say of me, 'She's a hard woman.' Perhaps I sha'n't care then about your friendship. I can trust you; I can lean upon you. But I don't suppose I shall see you—that isn't necessary. Vane seems to know that you are a strong, good man. He says you're like iron, only kind. He thinks you helped him when he needed help. He says you're the best fellow he knows."

"Hildreth is mistaken. I never did anything for him; I only let him work for me."

"You don't know anything about it; but I know what he means; I know."

Billy looked down at her gloves; she smoothed the backs of them. Still looking at them, she said:

"Yes; a strong, good man. I knew that from the first. I hate weak things. I'm a weak thing myself."

There was silence again after this, for Meloon did not feel that he could speak any commonplace. At last, however, he made a remark in a perfunctory manner.

"You may be mistaken in both your conclusions—that you are weak and that I am strong."

"Oh no; I'm not mistaken." She raised her eyes; they glanced across her companion and at last fixed themselves on a clump of dead, last year's brakes close to the door.

"Are you sorry I'm going to England?" she asked.

"Why should I be sorry, since in any case I shall not see you?"

"Yes; I know. But I'm sad about it. I'm very silly. I don't like to think of all that stretch of ocean that will be between me and—and this farm." She smiled with unsteady lips.

Meloon drew himself up with an impatient movement.

"Then why do you go?" he asked.

"Oh, I want to go and sing. You don't know what a flattering offer I've had. But I have such dreadful thoughts come into my mind."

"What thoughts?"

"That I might die over there—that I might die away from you, Mr. Meloon. If you have a strong, true friend, the thought of death is not dreadful—if you can be near that friend at the last moment. Or, if I might sing the most glorious strain that ever came from human lips, and then drop down dead—and so an end of it."

She was now looking up at her companion, who was standing stiffly beside her, his eyes having a glazed sort of appearance as they were set straight forward.

"You are very morbid," he said.

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Will the men come back soon?" again.

"Not yet. They've gone down to the other sugar orchard. The dogs went with them."

"I know where the other orchard is; I know just how it looks this lovely day. I dread to have Lotos come; yet I long to see him."

"Why do you dread seeing him?"

"Because I shall cry, and if I cry I may lose what little self-control I have left. It touches me so to be here again; I was so happy here."

"Will you stop talking like that?" with a sudden fury in his voice, and turning towards Billy as if he might seize her and throw her out among the trees.

She did not shrink; she met his eyes, which had flung off that haze, and which were now clear and shining.

Something reckless came into her face.

Instead of replying, she took a few steps away from the door. A puff of wind blew the loose hair about her forehead. She put up both hands to push the hair back, and she held her hands there as she said:

"Sometimes I think that this singing, this taking the parts of love and passion, and sometimes of wickedness, vitiates one's nature. I throw myself into the parts so—I try to forget what I really am. I have moments when I don't want to know right from wrong—oh, worse than that—when I'm willing to go wrong."

She had spoken hurriedly. She dropped her hands and hastened back to the man, who had not changed his attitude in the doorway.

"Mr. Meloon," she said, now speaking slowly, "are you disappointed in me? Do you think I'm wicked?"

"I can't be disappointed in you," he answered, hoarsely.

"Can't you?"

"No—no. You might do any dreadful thing—I should not be disappointed—you would still be yourself—yourself."

He pushed his hat back, and passed his hand across his forehead.

"I'm glad of that—I'm glad of that. I'm going to try and not be too wicked. I want you to respect me always—that is, there are not many minutes when I forget that. And I have been afraid that you didn't understand that I did not deceive Vane. You didn't think I deceived Vane, did you?"

"No," in the same indistinct voice.

"I told him that I didn't love him, and never should love him; but I liked him, you know. I said that the fancy I had once had for him was gone long ago, and would never come back. He thinks it will come back; but it won't. Mr. Meloon, you mustn't think I'm bold and unwomanly, but I did long to say this to you before I went to England. It's not very much to go to England, but there'll be such an ocean between us, and anything might happen. And I might have those desperate feelings come over me—about the poison, you know. I'm sure you'll always be a friend to mother. And I've made my will and left her all the law allows a wife to leave, except a few keepsakes for Vane." Here Billy paused ; she smiled slightly, and continued : "What a morbid, foolish thing I am ! But I feel better, now I've said these things to you. And you're sure"—becoming very grave—"that you don't think me bold and unwomanly?"

XXXVIII

THE SUGAR ORCHARD

MELOON took a momentary refuge in a quick, bodily movement. He turned and went into the "lean-to" shed, where were piled the big sticks of wood that were used under the boiler. He brought a couple of these and arranged them carefully in the fire. He raked the coals forward, then pushed a few of them back with the heel of his boot.

Billy watched him absorbedly. He returned to her with a set face, on which still lingered a slight flush from the fire.

"I think you the most womanly of women," he said, earnestly.

She covered her face with her hands for an instant. When she removed her hands she pulled off her gloves and thrust them into her coat-pocket. She walked from the door into the hut.

"Where's the ladle?", she asked, in a light tone. "Let's try the sap again. When is it time to syrup down? I used to long to smell this odor of boiling sap."

Before Meloon could reply there was the sound of voices, the breaking of twigs, the trampling of feet down the path.

"The men are coming," said Meloon, hurriedly; then still more quickly: "Give me your hand an instant, Billy. There."

He held the hand closely, looking down into her eyes.

"I wish," he said, in a half-whisper, "I wish that we might be true to—to the best. We shall never be sorry, shall we, if we are true to the best?"

Billy spoke, but inarticulately. She bent down and kissed the man's roughened hand, and tears dropped upon it.

"Don't!" he cried, "or I shall take you in my arms and run away with you."

His voice was so strange that Billy shrank.

Meloon stepped by her to the door just as three men and two dogs came in sight.

Lotos ran nosing eagerly here and there, his bit of a tail wagging with swift interrogation.

Billy sprang forward.

"Here—here!" she said, and the dog jumped at her.

She was crying openly now. The men stared at this woman, who was dressed as no one in those parts ever dressed, and who seemed not to care how the dog's feet soiled her silk and velvet. She kissed the dog's face, then held it between her hands and gazed at it, the jewels gleaming on her hands. Then one of the men exclaimed:

"Why, it's Mis' Armstrong's daughter—ain't it, Meloon?"

Meloon nodded, and walked down the hill, stopping to look into a sap-bucket that hung on a tree, examining it with a concentrated gaze that saw nothing whatever. He was listening to Billy's voice as she greeted these men and shook hands with them. They were the same men who had worked for him last spring, when Billy had been making butter, and at noons coming up to the sugar-house. He heard her cordial tones; he wondered that they gave no hint of any stress of feeling; but at the same time he was thankful that they did not. These country people were sometimes curiously sharp-eyed, even when they seemed dull, and they dearly loved a morsel of gossip. They knew all over the mountain-side when "a feller went home with a gal from prayer-meetin'," and they discussed the incident from a hundred points of view. If a horse at the village limped on a certain day the fact was known by nightfall in the remotest hamlet; and was it a spavin, or was his knee cut open by a stumble? It was these people who had decided long ago that Meloon would finally marry his housekeeper, and that such a marriage was about the right thing.

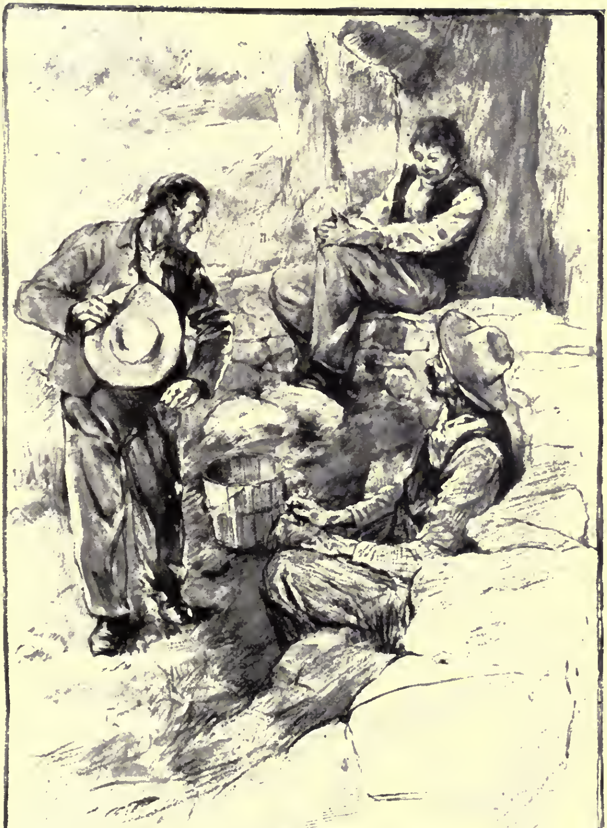
"As for that gal they call Billy—did you hear her sing in meetin' one Sunday when she was livin' on the Meloon farm? You did? Wall, the cold shivers kep' runnin' down my back all through the sermon, jest thinkin' of the way she sung. 'Twa'n't fittin'. I remember the minister preached about the Babylonish woman, 'n' ever sence then I've had that Armstrong gal 'n' the Babylonish woman mixed up in my mind."

"She made splendid butter; she took the first prize for butter at the fair, you remember."

Then there were shakings of the head, and an expression of the opinion that a girl who could "set in the choir 'n' sing like that was queer, even if she did make good butter." "'Tain't everything to make butter," was the conclusion.

While Meloon still stood by the maple where the sap was dripping into the bucket, Billy came to him.

"There was something else I wanted to say to you," she remarked. "I feel hurried, somehow. But there's


THOMAS FOGARTY.

"'DID YOU HEAR HER SINGING IN MEETIN' ONE SUNDAY?'"

something else. Won't you go down to the house with me? We can talk on the way."

In a few moments the two started, going slowly over the rough path, and in silence at first, the dogs with them, Lotos keeping close to the heels of his mistress, and occasionally leaping up on her skirts, panting to reach her face.

Presently they came to a little open space where the sun shone and the wind did not blow. Billy paused in her walk.

"I want to consult you," she said. "You're wise as well as strong." She smiled.

"I wish I could be wise and strong for myself," answered Meloon.

They stood in the little patch of sunlight. From here they could see the chimneys and roof of the house, and a stretch of the lane behind it.

"I have a great many letters," said Billy, abruptly.

Meloon stood quiet, his face showing how keen was his attention.

Billy had taken her gloves from her pocket and was twisting them in her fingers, her eyes fixed on what she was doing.

"Ever so many people write to me," she continued, after a pause, "because I'm a popular singer, you know. I think it's always that way. Girls and men fall in love with me—fancy they do—more girls than men, I should say. It's such an old story now that I don't read many of the letters—Bashy attends to them; if there is anything she thinks I ought to read she tells me. But there's one person who sends a letter every day—I always read that—I don't quite understand—" Here Billy paused, apparently for the simple reason that words had become so difficult to select. Meloon did not speak. "No, I don't understand why I feel as I do about these letters. I don't think I could do without them now—only we can do without many things that we think are necessary. Are you listening, Mr. Meloon? I hope I sha'n't bore you. Perhaps I ought not to take it for granted that you will be interested."

Meloon was aware that she looked at him wistfully; he was aware of this, though he did not meet her glance.

"I am listening. I am deeply interested," he answered.

"It's a great mystery," she resumed, "and perhaps that's one reason why I'm so interested; but it can only be a small reason, though, for I should have tired of them long ago, in that case."

She paused and seemed to be thinking deeply. Then she exclaimed:

"I live such a strange life that I hardly know what is real. But these letters have come to seem to me a part of my very self—something I must have. And they may stop at any time. It is some one's whim to send them; after a time the whim will cease to have power; and what shall I do then?"

"Who is the writer?" asked Meloon.

He remembered what Hildreth had told him of these epistles.

"I don't know. That's the mystery. Sometimes I think I'll make every effort to discover the author, and then I ask myself, What do I care? I might be thoroughly disillusioned, and I've made up my mind to hug my illusions—they're all that make life worth living."

Here she paused again, and her companion waited in silence. As he waited he saw Hildreth appear in the lane behind the house and stroll along it. Meloon's hands involuntarily closed themselves tightly as they hung by his sides.

"Often there's not more than a line or two, just to wish me good-morning. I have them in the morning, you know. A line—'May the day be bright to you!'—once it was, 'God bless you!' And the day is brighter to me for having the message. They are always type-written; there's not a personal hint about them. Indeed, their outward appearance is as impersonal as if they were bits of a newspaper that I picked up somewhere. They are not love-letters in any sense, though the writer does betray a kind of interest in me; but he has never hinted that he knows that I am a singer."

"He? How do you know this person is a man?" quickly from Meloon.

"I can't explain that, but I do know it, and he wishes me well; oh, I feel so strongly that he wishes me well; and the thought of his interest gives me strength day and night. I often think of him when I sing, and wonder if he has ever heard me. But the most curious part of my feeling is that everything seems disembodied—I can't tell you exactly what I mean. But it isn't love, or passion; it is as if we were both spirits, and yet not that, either. In fact, I don't understand, so I can't explain. But I wanted to tell you, Mr. Meloon; since I've known you I've had a belief that you would care to hear. I love to tell you things, and now I've told you about the type-writer—that's what Bashy and I call him—though we don't talk about him. Sometimes his letters are several pages long; I can't imagine why they stimulate and help me so. I'm wondering if I shall have them when I get to England. Someway the writer always knows where I am. It's a real mystery. Perhaps it would be easily solved if I should try to solve it, but I don't try, and I've made Vane take his oath that he won't try. I feel sure that when I do know I shall have no more letters. And I want them; I'm frightened when I think how much I want them. I don't understand myself at all. I must be a many-sided, superficial kind of a creature."

In the silence that followed the two could hear the robins calling to each other, proclaiming that spring had come again, and that this world was a fine world altogether.

"What does Hildreth think of all this?"

At last Meloon put this question.

"Vane? Oh, sometimes he laughs and sometimes he swears. Once in a while I show him one of the letters, but he doesn't care for them; he sees nothing in them; only he calls them clever. It isn't because they are clever that I care for them; it's because they are for me—they are for me—as nothing else has ever been. Now shall we go on?"

They went on down the hill, and soon met Hildreth, who shook hands warmly with Meloon, and whom the elder man thought looked thin and worn. There was a vertical mark between the handsome brows, and an uneasy compression of the lips.

A moment after he had joined them Billy said she would hurry on, and she did so, leaving the two men together. They watched her as she went swiftly down the path; then Vane kicked viciously at a rotten stump of a tree. The wet fragments flew up into the air, diffusing an odor of mould.

"I've a great mind to ask you to take me back on the farm, Meloon," he exclaimed. "I've made a damned mistake; and the worst of it is, I'd do it right over again, if I could."

XXXIX

CHANGING HIS MIND

MELOON turned with an abrupt movement towards his companion.

"Do what right over again?" he asked.

"Why, marry her, of course. What's happened to you, Meloon? You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"Ghosts? I'm seeing them all the time—ghosts of what might have been. We're all haunted, I reckon."

"Haunted? Yes; so am I. Take me on the farm again, Meloon, will you?"

"Do you mean that?" sharply. "Would you let your wife go to England without you?"

Hildreth repeated the words, "without me?" and then he burst into a laugh so loud that Billy, far down the hill, heard it, and half hesitated in her walk.

"You call her my wife, do you? Well, I suppose I do have a legal claim on her. She's the most tantalizing, maddening creature that God ever made. I've had fifty minds to run away from her; but I don't go. Now here's a chance to let her run away from me. She and Bashy can go just as well without me as with me; I've only to tell Billy that I've changed my mind, and throw up my passage. She'd give me an inquiring look, and say, 'Oh, have you?' and that's all; she wouldn't think of the matter a second time. By Jove, Meloon, don't you wish you were in my place?"

Hildreth kicked at the stump again.

"If I cut the whole thing," he went on, "I'm almost sure I should be better off. I thought if we were married I could win her. I was an idiot. She's further away than ever. She'll sit in a room with me and look over my head by the hour together, not knowing I'm there. But when she does know, she is kind; she says she 'thinks she's fond of me.' Jove! I wish you could hear her say it; it makes me want to yell. And I wish you could hear her sing now. Nobody ever sang like her; people are wild about her. And no wonder. When she sings a love song at me it nearly kills me. I can't help its seeming as if she meant it, and longing to have her mean it, and knowing all the time that she doesn't mean it, and never will. I've got it into my head that she is thinking of some one when she sings like that, and that makes me furious. It's vile of me, I know, to suspect such a thing, but how am I going to help it? And the cursed idea grows upon me. I can't stay with her, and I can't leave her; so there I am swinging this way and that, and in hell all the time. If I could only make up my mind to tell her to go to England without me; I'm trying to screw myself up to it every moment. Can't you reach out a helping hand to a fellow, Meloon?"

Hildreth's face took on for the instant the old femininely pleading expression, and he extended his hand to his companion, who took it and wrung it; as he let it go he said, in a deep voice:

"There are a good many things awry in this world."

He turned away, standing for a moment with face averted.

"I say," repeated Hildreth, with a sort of childish insistence, "will you take me on the farm again if I can make up my mind?"

Meloon kept the same position, and in spite of himself he hesitated perceptibly before he replied; then he said:

"Yes; certainly," and turned himself about so that he was squarely facing his companion.

"That's right," returned Hildreth, gloomily; "I felt sure you'd give me a chance to earn my bread by the sweat of my brow. I don't think it's good for me to sing with her. I try to be mechanical about it all, and about listening to her; but, gad, it's no use. And it takes it out of me horribly."

He thrust his hands into his pockets and whistled shrilly. Then he said that he guessed he was about screwed to the sticking-point, and he should keep on screwing.

Having spoken thus, Hildreth began to walk down the hill, but Meloon went back to the sap-house. He remained there for a couple of hours. He tramped from tree to tree gathering the buckets of sap; he had the appearance of a man utterly absorbed in his work. Though he talked with his assistants, his answers were wide. Trooper had stopped with him, and often the man turned to the dog and held out his hand; then the dog would come close and lick the fingers, looking up, after his kind.

At last Meloon went down to the house; it was high noon, and his guests were to leave in time to catch the evening train, several miles away, for Boston.

At the dinner-table Hildreth was very talkative, and he laughed a great deal as he talked. Billy sat beside her mother, who was flushed and tearful.

There seemed to be a great deal of conversation going on, and in the midst of it Hildreth exclaimed:

"What do you say, Billy, to my staying here instead of going with you?"

Though the tone was light, there was yet something in it that made Billy turn and look absorbedly at the speaker. Meloon, who was watching her, thought he saw a flicker come into her eyes. He was angry with himself because of the excitement he felt. It was hard to sit quiet and betray nothing of the storm within him; and he was still quivering from the memory of that interview among the maples. He did, however, sit stolidly.

"Oh, I don't know," said Billy, at last; "I suppose you'll do as you please."

"As if I ever did as I pleased!"

"They'll have to get me another tenor—and you'll break your contract."

"Pshaw! There are tenors enough. There's Josselyn would give his eyes to take my place."

"His voice is lighter than yours."

"No matter; he'll do well enough."

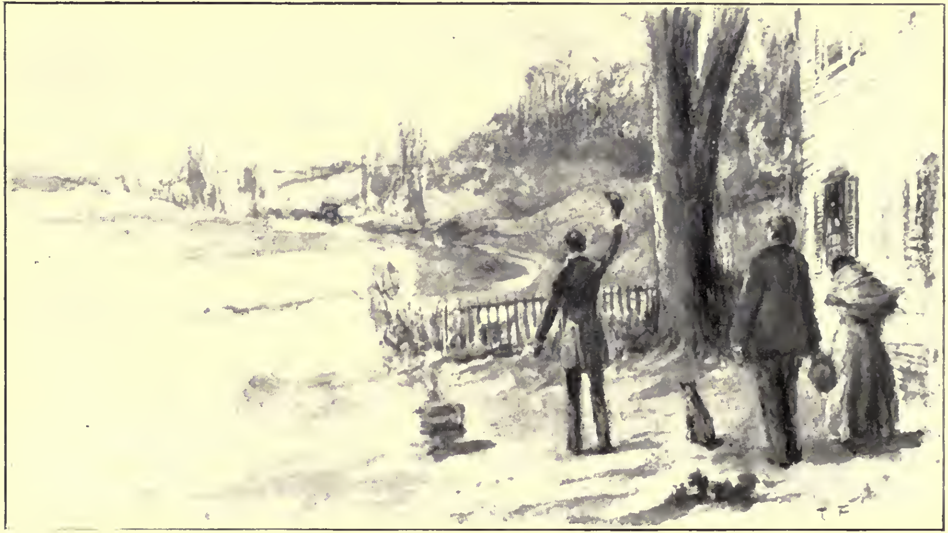
Hildreth had kept his eyes on his wife's face, and what he saw there evidently irritated him almost beyond control. He slapped his hand down on the table and cried out:

"I say, Meloon, will you stand to your word and let me stay here? It's 'most planting-time, you know."

"Of course I hold to my word."

"It's a bargain, then. Billy, you and Bashy may go without me. You may take a letter to the manager. The contract may go hang."

He struck the table again. He had the appearance of a man who had been drinking too much wine.



"STOOD AN INSTANT GAZING AFTER THE CARRIAGE"

Bashy stared at him an instant; then she said, emphatically:

"Vane, you're a fool."

"All right; I know that well enough; but it isn't the first time I've been a fool."

"Oh, dear," said Mrs. Armstrong, "have you two been quarreling? Miny never used to be quarrelsome—did you, Miny?"

Billy put her hand on her mother's shoulder.

"Hush! hush!" she said, softly; "Vane and I don't quarrel."

She looked at Vane, but she would not ask him to give up this plan, though she saw that he was longing for her to do so. Her eyes sparkled; she lowered them directly.

Bashy laughed.

"It's rather hard to be the only sane one," she said.

Bashy had grown fat since that time when she lived with her aunt and her brother in the house-wagon; and a double chin, she asserted, was the most unbecoming thing she could set up.

She now glanced interrogatively at Meloon, but she got no response. Dinner went on tamely enough after this, and they soon left the table.

Vane lingered. Was he hoping that Billy would say something which he could make an excuse for changing his mind?

Bashy came to him and drew him into the yard.

"Vane, are you out of your senses?"

"Yes!" defiantly.

He kept himself to this mood until the time came to start for the station. One of the hired men was to drive them. Meloon professed himself too busy.

The good-byes were gone through with some way.

Billy and her mother came down from Mrs. Armstrong's chamber, and Billy walked up to her host and held out her hand. He could see that she was trembling, but she spoke steadily.

She said she knew what she and her mother owed to him. Then she stopped, and added:

"Good-bye, Mr. Meloon."

Her voice was barely audible; there was something in it that made Bashy, who was standing near, suddenly walk to her side and put her arm about her.

"Come," said Bashy; "here's the carriage."

The two women walked out-of-doors. Vane kissed his wife and sister and put them in the carriage, and the next moment they were driven off. Meloon was holding Lotos by the collar, and the dog was straining to get away, his whines choked in his throat. Mrs. Armstrong was crying. Hildreth stood an instant staring after the carriage. The two men saw Billy look back and wave her hand, and they took off their hats. Then Hildreth jammed his hat down on his head, turned, and hurried off into the pasture behind the house.

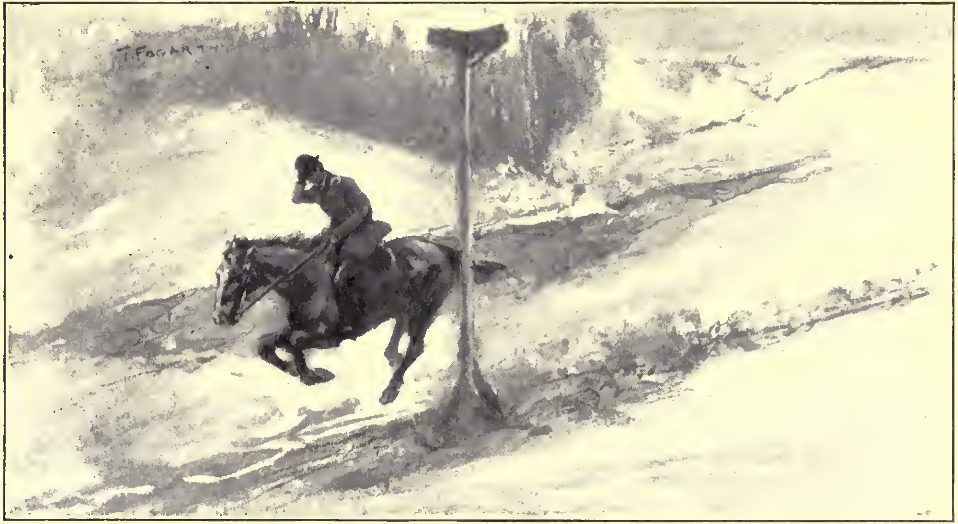
Meloon gazed after him, his face hard and stern.

"Does he think he's the only one who suffers?" he asked, inaudibly.

All the rest of the day Hildreth kept away. At nightfall he came into the kitchen and asked Mrs. Armstrong for the milk-pail.

"But you'll spoil them nice clo'es," she said, as she gave him the pail.

He ran up-stairs, and presently came down in the denim suit which he had left there. He went up to Billy's mother and put his arm about her in his old caressing way. He was pale and had a dragged look.



"RIDING FURIOUSLY ALONG THE ROAD"

"It's awfully hard to bear," he half whispered.

Mrs. Armstrong drew nearer to him.

"But why didn't you go with her, then?" she asked, smoothing his hair from his forehead.

"It isn't that—I could bear to have her go, bad as that would be—it's—" here he let his head fall on her shoulder, and he sobbed as he spoke, "it's because she doesn't love me—not in the least—not in the least. That's why I didn't go."

At first Mrs. Armstrong's surprise was so great that she could not speak. Then she managed to ask,

"Who does she love, then?"

Hildreth raised his head; he drew his hand quickly across his eyes, in which, with the tears, there glittered a flash of suspicion.

"Whom does she love?" he repeated. "Why, nobody. How strange for you to ask such a question."

He stood looking steadily at his companion for a moment. Then, without meaning to speak aloud, he yet said:

"Those letters! She has been having letters."

"What do you mean?"

Mrs. Armstrong was frightened by the expression in the young man's face, and she herself had cloudy and horrible ideas of the opportunities for wickedness which come to an opera-singer.

Hildreth shook himself impatiently. He wondered why, until this moment, he had never had precisely this same sensation concerning those letters.

"Oh," he answered, trying to speak carelessly, "they are nothing. I've seen them when I chose; there's really nothing of consequence in them; I never could understand why she seems to care for them so."

"She cares ever so much for them?"

"You are shocked, aren't you? Did you ever hear of a woman's caring for letters her husband didn't write? But there's honor in Billy, though she has an unaccountable streak of lawlessness in her, too. I wish she loved me."

Hildreth stood a moment hesitatingly; then he went to the barn with his milk-pail.

It was before light on the following morning that he stopped at his host's door.

"I say, Meloon," he called out, "I'm going to take that brown mare and ride her to the station, to try to catch that early down train. May I leave the mare with the agent there?"

"All right," was the answer. "Changed your mind?"

"Yes. Thank you, old fellow; thank you."

Hildreth was dressed in the clothes he came in. Meloon heard him run to the barn, and then, presently, the canter of horse's feet. The dogs barked, and then all was still again.

Hildreth was riding furiously along the silent country road. The mare lowered herself and stretched away, her head extended and her nostrils dilated. Hildreth had not slept at all, but had passed a night of torture and indecision. He pictured Billy going away without him, having this experience and that, and he not near to know, perhaps to protect her. But most he thought of those letters, and the thought of them stung him.

At last he told himself he had been insane to make any such resolution. Perhaps he could catch that morning train and be at the wharf in time. Having come to this decision, he was mad to act upon it.

The sure-footed mare fled over the distance, needing no urging after she understood what was required of her.

XL

WITH ALL MY HEART

THE train was coming when Hildreth flung himself off the saddle at the station.

He ran to the agent, who was leisurely stepping from the door.

"It's Meloon's mare—put her in your barn—rub her down—he'll send for her."

The conductor was calling "'Board!" Hildreth flung a silver dollar at the agent and swung on to the step of the car, holding on as it slid along the rails.

He entered and sank down panting on the end seat. He was exultant, and he remained in that mood all through the journey. He could hardly believe he had ever been so blind and stupid as to have thought he would let his wife go without him. Why, he was longing to see her; he couldn't live away from her. It seemed to him that he hardly breathed from the time he started from the farm, in the early dusk, until his cab-driver pulled up on the wharf at East Boston and he saw the steamer lying there. After all, he had plenty of time; there was half an hour yet. But he had been possessed by the fear that every watch and clock might be wrong and he be late.

He did not know what a haggard, ghost-like appearance he presented as he walked up the gangway.

He had stood on the wharf, scanning the faces of the women on deck. It would be like Bashy to be there, but he could not see her.

He went on board; he walked to the other side. He stopped suddenly. There were comparatively few people here, for the passengers who had not gone to their rooms were mostly on the side nearest the wharf, exchanging with their friends a more or less emotional farewell.

But here was Billy standing alone, leaning against the rail and gazing absently out at the shipping. Hildreth saw her profile and was startled at the pathetic curve of lips and chin, the invincible sadness of the brow.

Then he began to fear. Would she be glad to see him? Could he dare to hope that she was thinking of him?

His eyes glanced down the slender, well-dressed figure. He made a step forward, and still she did not move. He came yet nearer and said,

"Billy."

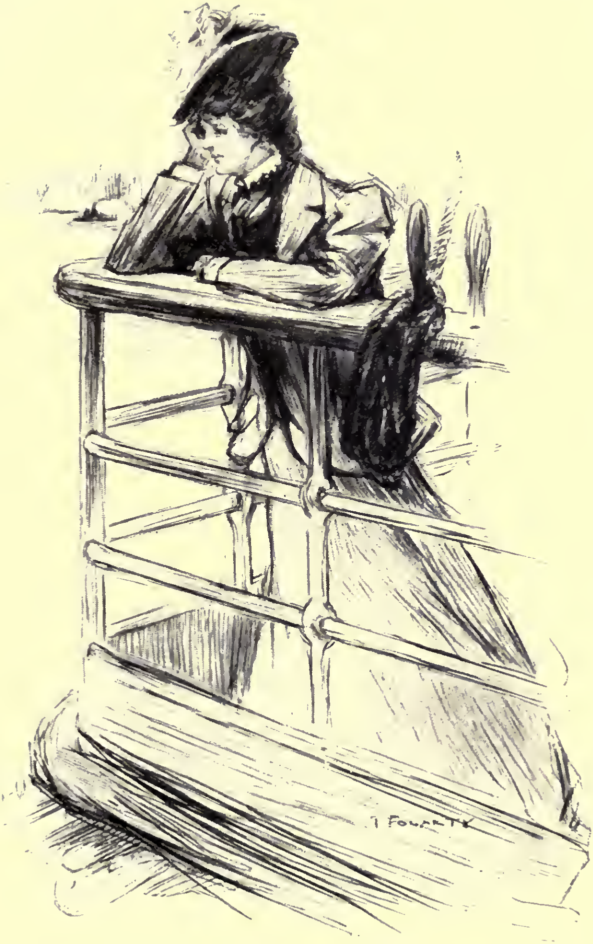
She turned quickly, and her eyes met his for an instant before either spoke again. Billy's face had grown red, but now she was becoming pale. Something severe and remote seemed to come into her eyes.

"You see I couldn't help coming," he said, apologetically. His heart was sinking.

She moved uneasily; she clasped the rail more closely. She withdrew her eyes and fixed them apparently on Hildreth's boots.

"How could I help coming, after all?" he said. "It is beyond my strength to stay away from you. I ought to have known I couldn't do it."

Still she did not speak. The young man was



"BUT HERE WAS BILLY STANDING ALONE"

chilled by her aspect and her silence. She was usually kind, in a way, genial, if somewhat careless in her manner when with him.

"Aren't you going to speak to me?" he asked.

She raised her eyes to his face.

"But if I have nothing to say?" she responded.

"Aren't you glad to see me?"

She turned and gazed at the harbor, moved her hands, clasping them and unclasping them.

"Oh, Billy, can't you answer me?"

"Why do you make me hurt you?"

"Then you're not glad?"

"I—I thought you were not coming," she said.

Evidently she wished to add something more, but she did not.

Hildreth stepped up closer to her. He was now so white that he was ghastly.

There was a swift rustle of skirts, and Bashy came up.

"What! Vane!" she cried.

He turned upon her with fury.

"Go away!" he said; "I must see Billy."

His sister had never seen him like this, and she walked off without even a retort. She turned to look at him, but she dared not come back.

"You don't wish me to cross with you?"

Hildreth had steadied himself somewhat by this time.

"I thought you were not going with us, and I—you see, Vane, I had made up my mind to go without you, and—oh, I can't tell you."

"You shall tell me," savagely.

"Very well. I had made up my mind to go without you, and I felt a—Vane, I do hate to hurt you—I felt a kind of relief. Oh, how you look at me!"—imploringly.

She was now as white as he.

"A relief."

He repeated those words after a moment; then he also turned and clasped the rail, staring downward blindly.

People walked by these two, and some glanced back wonderingly at them.

After a time Billy moved nearer her husband. She reached forth her hand as if to put it on his arm, but it fell to her side without having touched him.

"I can't bear to have you suffer," she whispered.

There was no response; they stood side by side, close together. Billy was not thinking at all. In Hildreth's mind was a groping, violent protest against fate, and the conviction that he couldn't endure it; no, he couldn't endure it.

"Dear Vane."

The words came tremulously to him; he moved slightly in response, but he did not try to speak. He knew that Billy's eyes were fixed upon his face.

"I can't help it," she went on, hurriedly; "but I was relieved when you decided not to go—I was so thankful. It seems wicked, doesn't it?—and strange, for I'm really very fond of you; yes, really fond. If you didn't love me, perhaps we might get on better. Do you think we might?"

"Don't we get on well together?" he asked, speaking the words downward, without raising his head.

"Oh yes—yes; only—"

She hesitated, but he finished the sentence.

"Only I'm always wanting something you can't give."

"Yes."

A woman had just gone by; she paused.

"That's Miss Armstrong," she was saying to herself, "and that is the tenor. What's the matter? By the look of their faces anything might happen—anything."

She stood still, intently curious, resolved to know what did happen.

Apparently nothing; but shortly the conversation continued.

"Can't you ever give it?"

Hildreth put the question almost inaudibly, but Billy heard, and replied

"No."

There was such sweetness and gentleness in her tone that she might have been saying "yes."

The woman watching, who could not hear, thought she had said "yes," and remembered yet more distinctly that she had always believed that those two opera-singers were in love with each other. It was quite interesting to watch them.

Another silence fell. There were more people moving about as the time for sailing drew nearer; there were laughing and talking, shrill little cries from girls who were very girlish and vehement in their manner, and made crescendoes in their utterance, and great play with eyes and eyebrows.

Hildreth turned from the rail.

"Curse this crowd!" he exclaimed.

He drew out his watch and looked at it.

"There's half an hour yet. May I stay that time?"

Billy had taken his hand and was holding it closely; there was an agony of pity and self-reproach in her distended eyes.

"Yes—yes," she murmured.

The woman watching said to herself, "How she loves him!"

"But this infernal mob!" went on Hildreth. "I want to say something and I can't."

Without replying Billy led the way to her room. Two or three times Hildreth was compelled to doff his hat to smiling ladies who knew, and perhaps adored, the handsome tenor. He took off his hat, but he scowled blankly at them as he did so.

Billy sat down the moment she reached her room; Hildreth closed the door and stood with his back against it. He looked at her for an instant before he said, abruptly:

"Your mother asked me something about you."

This remark was so unexpected that Billy had no response to make; she sat gazing up at the face before her.

"Yes," went on Hildreth, "and it struck me as odd that I hadn't thought of the same thing. She said, 'Who is it that Miny loves?'"

Billy met the question as a soldier might meet a bullet he had been long expecting. It is true that she grew white, but she did not flinch; neither did she answer; she sat quiet, with her eyes fixed on Vane.

Still something came into her face that made the man say instantly:

"Then she is right! There is some one whom you love?"

Even now she did not lower her eyes as she replied.

"Yes, there is some one."

The man's poor white face was piteous to see. At last he smiled stiffly.

"Is it too much for me to ask his name?"

She shook her head.

"You mean that it is too much, or that you won't tell?"

She shook her head again. For the instant speech was plainly beyond her.

"Those letters," said Hildreth. He drew a long breath. "Who writes those letters?"

"I don't know."

Hildreth was always able to believe her spoken word implicitly.

"You love the writer of them?"

"Sometimes I'm sure I do."

"Ah!" on a whispering breath. "I must find out who that man is."

"No—no. If you should harm him I should hate you, and then—"

She stopped suddenly.

"And then what?"

"Why, I'm not sure—I'm confused—"

"Not sure of what?"

Hildreth's eyes flashed. He could almost have thought that she was mocking him.

"You must think me a strange being," said Billy, "but not so strange as I think myself. I love the writer of those letters, not because he has ever written a word of love in them, but, somehow, my heart goes out to him—I can't help it."

"You call it mysterious and romantic—that's why you think you love the unknown writer."

Hildreth spoke hopefully. "If you should ever meet him, you might—"

"I've often thought of that," interrupted Billy, quickly; "perhaps I should dislike him; a personal presence sometimes repels when—but why do I talk like this?"

"Let's drop the whole subject," began Hildreth, eagerly. "Just give me a chance to live down the influence of mere letters—and they may stop coming," hopefully.

There was something of the ridiculous as well as of the pathetic in Hildreth's position, and he felt it and was irritated by it; but he tried to hold himself in check.

"I've often thought of that," said Billy; "they may stop coming; perhaps they have stopped. I've had no letter to-day—for the first day since they began."

Hildreth said "Ah!" again, this time as a joyful exclamation.

"You know I'd try to be content with so little; I have no pride as far as you are concerned. You hold my life in your hands. Billy, you'll forget those letters—Billy?" with still more eagerness.

She threw out her hand in a gesture which he could not interpret.

"Oh, Vane, please don't begin to look hopeful! I was frightened at the relief I felt when I knew you were not going—there, I'm hurting you. It's dreadful to have to hurt you. Listen to me now, and don't quite hate me—but, yes, hate me with all your heart; that will be the best way. There's something else."

Here Billy rose in a kind of pale heat of excitement, though her movements were perfectly quiet. She went to Vane and put her hands on his chest, pressing them there as if to emphasize her words, and at the same time to deprecate their effect.

As for him, he waited for her to speak again, but as she remained silent, he clasped his hands over hers and said, hoarsely:

"How can there be anything else? Isn't that enough?"

"Enough? Oh yes; too much. I bring you no good-luck, dear Vane. I never meant to tell you, but I must. I do love some one—I love him with all my heart—with all my heart."

XLI

HILDRETH'S REFUGE

HAVING thus spoken, Billy turned away and went to her chair again. She leaned her elbows on her knees and bent her face to her hands. But she did not sob; she sat still.

Hildreth remained quiet also, and they heard the sound of people hurrying over the planks above them, and through the bit of an open window the soft swish of the water against the boat's side.

Hildreth felt suddenly dull; the clearest thought in his mind was that he had but a few moments more before the steamer would start. He roused himself and mechanically drew out his watch; but he found that, though he could see the dial, he could not control his mind sufficiently to tell the time.

"Who is that man?"

He was able at last to put this question.

Without raising her head Billy answered,

"It will do no good for you to know."

"Who is he?"

"I shall not tell."

Hildreth stepped forward and laid his hand heavily on his companion's shoulder.

"Who is he?" he repeated, and she, still in the same position, repeated her answer.

It struck him suddenly that he was in danger of acting like a vulgar bully.

"Well, good-bye," he said. "I believe I can trust you. It's a damned muddle we are in."

He opened the door and stepped without it; he returned instantly, bent over Billy, and kissed her hair. Then he ran on deck and to the gangway. Some one caught his arm as he sprang forward; as he shook off the hold he saw that it was his sister Bashy; but he could not speak. He hurried on then, on the wharf, turned, and waved his hand to her.

Everybody was leaving the boat now, save those who were embarking. Hildreth pushed through the crowd and darted among the carriages. He did not pause until he was in a ferry-boat. He went into the bare little cabin and placed himself on one of the benches. He was thinking confusedly that there must not be in his manner anything melodramatic. He believed that when you are suffering tragedy you often act melodrama.

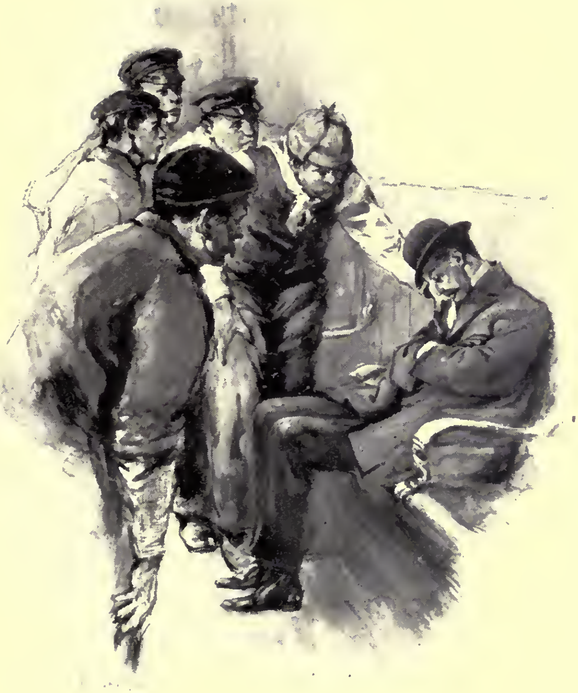
Presently the little boat began its trip. He heard somebody say, "The Cunarder is just starting," but he did not glance about him.

On board that Cunarder Bashy had joined Billy in her state-room. She went up to where the latter still sat and shook her somewhat roughly.

"What have you done now?" she asked.

"Done? Nothing," raising her head and looking at the girl. Then she added, quickly: "I never wanted to make him unhappy. God knows, I tried to do as well as I could."

She rose, stood a moment looking about her, then she said: "I wish you would leave me, Bashy. I want to be alone."



"'GOING TO BUNK ON THIS BOAT?'"

So Bashy left her and went on deck to watch the coast unfold and recede, and to see the great shaft of Minot's Light come nearer and then be left behind. Bashy's face was very sober as she stood there among the outward-bound. She was saying to herself over and over:

"I wonder how it 'll turn out—I wonder how it 'll turn out"; and she added, "I don't like the looks of it."

Hildreth did not leave the ferry when it came to the slip on the Boston side. He continued to sit there on the bench, his head lowered on his breast, his arms folded loosely. And the third trip the boat made he was still sitting there. Mind and sense were for the time blurred.

After a while, as the hours wore on, some of the "hands" noticed this well-dressed man who did not leave the boat, and who sat so quiet.

"Drunk?" said one of them.

"Opium drunk, then; there's no liquor about that."

Finally one of them went up to Hildreth and shook his shoulder.

"Come, it's getting on in the day—goin' to bunk on this boat?"

Hildreth raised absent eyes; then he rose and straightened himself. He made no reply, but when the boat touched the slip again he walked to the wharf. It was nearly sunset now. He made his way to a hotel on Hanover Street, feeling sure that he should see no one who knew him. He went to bed almost immediately, before the long twilight was over, and he fell asleep directly, sleeping hard and heavily for many hours. When he wakened, the twilight of the new day was coming over the heavens.

It seemed to Hildreth that his present course was clear to him now. He would go back, as quickly as he could go, to the farm he had just left. He loathed the thought of staying where he could see people; and he wanted to be near Meloon.

Therefore it happened that, in the afternoon of that day, while Meloon was walking up over the height of the sheep-pasture, with the two dogs demurely nosing about, he saw a man coming up on the other side of the slope; the next moment he recognized Hildreth. The dogs went forward for greeting, but Meloon stood still, getting a grip on himself, as he phrased it. Then the two men clasped hands closely, looking in each other's eyes a moment in silence.

"You missed the boat?" at last Meloon said.

"No; I had an hour on the boat."

"You saw her?"

"Yes."

Silence. The hands of both men were thrust into their pockets, and they were gazing off towards the blue defile of The Notch.

"It's no use," at last Hildreth said. He waited, and then he added: "She said she was relieved when she thought I wasn't going. Naturally, I decided I wouldn't go."

Meloon made no attempt at a reply; nevertheless, for some reason, Hildreth drew comfort from the man's presence. They did not change their attitude.

"So I've come back here to farm it with you, if you'll let me."

"All right."

"I couldn't think of a place under heaven where I'd rather be. I'll work like two men."

"It 'll be enough if you'll work like one."

Without turning, Meloon added:

"Will it help you to know that it hasn't been always smooth sailing with me?"

"Hasn't it?" quickly. "Somehow I thought you never ventured into deep water."

"Yes, I did, once."

"Shipwrecked?" quickly.

"I think you'd call it shipwrecked. I lost her."

Hildreth moved to his companion's side; he laid one arm over Meloon's shoulder.

"Is that so? I never would have guessed it. Long ago?—the wound is healed?"

"It doesn't make much difference how long ago it was; and I can't say the wound is healed. I thought I'd tell you. A man sometimes bears things better to know that others are bearing the same things. It's cowardly to let the inevitable spoil one's life."

"Easy enough to say that. I can't help it that my life is spoiled—but it is."

Meloon turned now and fixed his eyes on the face near him.

As has been stated, there was often something feminine in Hildreth when he was suffering. Perhaps it was this something that appealed so to the strong man beside him. Meloon drew Hildreth's face towards him and for an instant pressed his cheek against that of the young man.

Then the two went on down the pasture, and they came upon half a dozen sheep gathered under a pine-tree. The sheep looked at them, their queer, light eyes not blinking as they looked. Meloon thrust his hand into the pocket of his overalls; he found some fragments of salt; he flung them on a smooth rock, and presently, as the sheep scrambled, other sheep shoved their heads above a neighboring slope, then came trotting briskly forward, lapping eagerly at the salt, pushing each other, but curiously gentle withal.

The men stood watching for a few moments while the sun sank behind a mountain; then dogs and men went to the house, and presently Hildreth was striding down to the cow-pasture, calling "Coo! coo!" as he went; and then, from among the balsam-trees in the valley, there sounded the "clank, clank" of a cow-bell, and a large, solemn-faced black and white cow came in sight leading the way up the narrow path among the blackberry bushes and the big brakes. She wore the bell, and behind her followed, in single file, eight or ten Holsteins and Jerseys, coming along sedately, switching their tails solemnly. They had had their outing, but it was not yet time for pasture-feed.

XLII

UNSTABLE HILDRETH

LIFE was very simple on the farm. The people rose early and went to bed early. It was a kind of monotony that might act as a healing balm. Twice a month some kind of mail came from over the water, addressed to Mrs. Armstrong. Often it was a package of papers, sometimes a letter. One of these letters was this:

"MY DEAR MOTHER,—I must send you word, though I have nothing of importance to write. I am prospering greatly in my work; they all praise; I've sung before the Queen—or did I tell you that before? I've been bidden to see her Majesty—she was so kind—and she has sent me a diamond bracelet. I'm as successful as I ever dreamed of being. I'm well, and so prosperous that I'm confused when I think of it. I'm putting money in the W—— bank in your name, mother, so that, whatever happens, you'll be provided for. I know you would rather stay where you are until I come back. One day I shall sail away for America, and then you and I will live somewhere in the country, and grow old together. But, as for me, I'm old now. Remember me to the friends on the farm, and hug Lotos for me; pull his clipped ears, and tell him my heart still beats for him. Don't let anything happen to him. I cry when I think of him, but you may be sure I don't cry at any other time. Bashy says I'm getting to be the hardest-hearted woman she knows. I'm glad of that. I wonder if you are as much of a Second Adventist as ever, mother. I think sometimes I'm getting to be an Adventist myself. I see visions. Bashy thinks I'm more than half crazy now, that success has turned my head, but not in the usual way."

Mrs. Armstrong read these letters aloud on the winter evenings when she sat at her side of the hearth, and the two men listened.

Once Billy wrote:

"There is often before me the time when I shall lose my voice. I don't mean the time when it has gradually worn out; it won't go that way. It will go as it did that night in Milan. Some night I shall step out before the footlights, and the audience will greet me, and I shall try to sing, and find that I cannot. That will be the last. After that I shall never make the attempt again. Then, mother, you and I will get a New Hampshire farm, a place where we can see The Notch from the windows at the back of the house, and you and I and Lotos will live there."

When she read this letter Mrs. Armstrong's voice broke twice. She folded the sheets.

"I'm sure I don't know what I'm crying about," she said, putting the letter on the stand by her and laying her hand upon it. "She seems real cheerful, don't she? And if she's cheerful, I guess we can be. I don't s'pose she need to be thinkin' she'll lose her voice again. Do you, Vane?"

Hildreth, thus addressed, turned towards the woman. He had been sitting with his feet stretched towards the blaze on the hearth, his hands in his pockets, his chin resting on his chest.

"What did you say?" he asked.

Mrs. Armstrong repeated her remark. Hildreth drew his hand across his forehead.

"Oh," he said, wearily, "I don't know—how can I tell? If she would only come back! God! If she would only come back!"

This was the first time the young man had permitted himself any outbreak. Mrs. Armstrong stared at him anxiously. Hildreth sat up in his chair. He laughed slightly as he spoke again in his ordinary voice.

"Don't mind me, Mrs. Armstrong."

The woman shook her head.

"There always was something in Miny that I couldn't make out," she said. "I wonder if she will be an Adventist, after all."

She glanced over at Meloon; but Meloon was gazing into the fire, his chin firm and square, the great grizzled mustache sweeping off on each side of his face.

He made no response. Presently he reached his hand down and let it rest on Trooper's big tawny head, for the dog was lying close to his chair.

That night, after Mrs. Armstrong had gone up to her room, Hildreth asked Meloon to bring out his violin.

"Let us call up the ghosts," he said. "You haven't touched your violin for months, and you keep the piano locked. We'll sing:

"'The gods may release
That they made fast;
Thy soul shall have ease
In thy limbs at last.
But what shall they give thee for life, sweet life that is overcast?'"

"No," returned Meloon, "I shall not touch the violin; and I keep the piano locked lest you should bring out a chord on it. You've done well to keep from singing. I'll have no playing or singing about this house."

Meloon rose to his feet; he stood there tall, with something threatening in his aspect; for an instant he seemed off his guard, but only for an instant. Then his whole mien relaxed. He smiled and put his hand on Hildreth's arm.

"I've taken a notion—even old fellows like me have their notions, you see. Shall we have a game of chess before we go to bed? I'm two ahead of you now."

The two sat down with the chess-men between them; Meloon played with steady power, Hildreth wildly and without interest, until, all at once, he thrust forth his hand and swept pawns and queens and knights to the floor.

"What's the use?" he cried. "I've been wondering lately if he loves her."

Meloon looked at him in silence. He raised his hand to hide a sudden and uncontrollable twitching of the lips. At the instant things seemed utterly intolerable to him, and he asked himself how they were to be borne. But he rallied immediately; the very thought of Billy gave him power to rally.

"That man whom she loves, you know," went on Hildreth, hurriedly. "And who is he?" he slapped his open hand down on the table—"who in hell is he?"

"Hush!"

"Pshaw! Don't say that to me. Who is he, I say. Haven't I been as quiet as a sheep all these weeks? I haven't lisped a word; but a man isn't a sheep, after all—he has hot blood in him. Who is he? Is he over there with her? Is she letting him make love to her while I'm staying here milking cows and feed-ing pigs? How long do you think I'm going to bear it, eh?"

"You're doing what you chose," coldly from the other.

"So I am—so I am. Well"—another blow on the table—"I don't choose it any more, that's all. I'll go over there; I'll find out. I'll shoot somebody; I can at least shoot myself, and so clear the ground for her. That's a good idea, isn't it, Meloon, to shoot myself? She'd be more fond of me than ever; she says she's fond of me. I swear I don't know what to make of her. I'm going over there. It's the only way."

Hildreth turned as if he would start that moment.

Meloon let him reach the door before he spoke his name; then he spoke it with a sharp note of authority. The other man paused with his hand on the latch.

"Do you mean you're going to cross the water? Do you mean you're going to join her?"

"Yes, that's what I mean," standing at the door with his back towards Meloon.

"When she is relieved to have you away from her? Be a man, Hildreth, be a man."

Hildreth took a step and dropped into a chair. He covered his face with his hands as a woman might have done.

"Then all that's left for me to do is to take myself out of the way," he said.

A slight vibration seemed to pass through Meloon's frame. He did not speak for a moment. When he did break the silence his slowly enunciated words whipped his listener as a lash might have done.

"You are a cowardly creature to think of such a thing. Do you want to leave a legacy like that to your wife? Do you believe she could ever be happy if you had killed yourself to free her? Hildreth, I have no patience with you."

Another silence. At last Hildreth uncovered his face, but he did not look at his companion; he stared down at the floor; there was a sullen blackness on his countenance, and a something that made Meloon distrust him.

"I have a right to do as I please, and I shall do as I please," he said finally.

Then he rose and left the room. Meloon heard him go heavily up the stairs; he heard the door of his chamber close. After that everything was still.

An east wind had risen since sunset, and it was now sobbing between the eastward hills and spreading a deep chill everywhere. Fine particles of snow floated on this wind, and this snow gradually grew dense enough to make a continuous sharp sound on the window-panes.

Meloon walked about the room for a time after Hildreth had gone. At first he uttered detached words, but he soon became silent, continuing his monotonous strides back and forth, back and forth.

Then he sat down by the hearth; he raked the coals together and gazed at the scarlet mass. The clock made its premonitory noise; it was about to strike one.

A half hour passed. Meloon had put some beech sticks on the coals, and the flames went straight up the chimney, making a sound as of wind among dry branches.

Trooper was on one side of the hearth, Lotos on the other. At a quarter after two the bull-terrier raised his head and growled. Immediately the St. Bernard did the same. Then, noiselessly and swiftly, they sat up on their haunches, listening, ears raised, eyes dilated.

"Well, what is it, boys?" asked Meloon.

He had heard nothing save the fire and the long sough of the wind and snow.

Nevertheless, he dropped his slippers from his feet and drew on the great rubber boots that stood in the corner just the other side of the kitchen door. He did these things noiselessly, listening the while.

But he heard nothing. The dogs, after being attentive a moment, had dropped their heads, and now lay with their muzzles between their extended paws, their eyes bright and watchful.

Meloon sat down again in the chair in front of the fire; he had brought his big ulster, and it lay across his knees. He had done this mechanically, however, and was hardly aware of the fact.

The wind increased as the time drew on towards morning.

Meloon went to the window and peered behind the curtain; he could see the white rack of snow driving past. The mercury was falling steadily; arabesques of frost had already covered a great part of the panes of glass.

Meloon stood irresolutely in the middle of the room. He lifted his ulster from the chair on which he had flung it and put it on, not knowing why he did so.

"I am beginning to have notions," he said, aloud; "sure sign of a weakening mind."

He was about to throw off the coat when the dogs sprang up, barking furiously, and rushing to the door.

XLIII

MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

TROOPER and Lotos dashed at the door so impetuously that the man was obliged to thrust them away to make room for himself. When he had reached the entry into which the east outer door opened, Mrs. Armstrong called from above:

"Rawdon! Rawdon!"

"Here I am. What is it?"

"Oh, what has happened? What's the matter with the dogs?"

"I don't know. Have you heard anything?"

"Not a thing—and I couldn't sleep. Oh, what's going to happen? Where's Vane?"

Meloon stood below in the entry, with a lamp in his hand. He could not divest himself of a sense of terror, though he thought himself weak on account of that sense.

"In his room," he replied, calmly; "call him."

Mrs. Armstrong, in wrapper and shawl, stepped across the narrow hall and rapped loudly on Hildreth's door.

"Vane!" she called. "Vane!"

In the moment of waiting Meloon, below, said:

"We're silly. All this because the dogs chose to bark."

And he did not understand why he had been so startled.

Vane had not answered.

"Call again. Odd that he should sleep so soundly."

The dogs were quiet for the moment; they stood, one on either side of Meloon, gazing up the stairs with him.

Mrs. Armstrong called once more, but Meloon waited no longer. He ran up and put his hand on the latch, half expecting to find the bolt shot across. But the door opened directly. A lamp was burning; the bed had been tumbled. A russet-leather case that Meloon knew had held a revolver was open and empty. A gripsack was also open, and some clothes were thrown about. He held the lamp here and there, looking for a bit of paper. Perhaps Vane had left some word. Yes, here it was on the shelf:

"Don't worry about me. A man can't always endure. I take the pistol, but I can't decide whether to use it on him or on myself. The time has come when I've got to know who he is. Thanks, Meloon, thanks; you're a good fellow, and you're well rid of a puling weakling like me. I think I'll bring up at the station by the time that down train comes; or if I don't, no matter. I say, Meloon, you're a man; you're worth ten of me. Now I've taken my pencil I find there's a lot of things I want to say. It's growing cold, I fancy; but my brain is hot enough to keep me warm. I've a great mind to live until I find that fellow. Think of the happiness of the man whom Billy loves! By Jove! I want to see that man! I don't understand why my fingers run on so with this pencil. I shall get out, and you won't know I'm gone until the morning. Don't forget that the Jersey heifer with a white spot on her face will kick the pail over if she can when you milk her."

Meloon stood an instant with the paper in his hand after he had read the last word.

"He hasn't been gone long. The dogs heard him. I shall find him," he was thinking.

"Oh, what is it?" from Mrs. Armstrong.

Meloon held the paper towards her. He did not speak until he had reached the foot of the stairs; then he called out:

"I'm going after him."

He fastened his coat, drew a fur cap down over his ears, and stepped out-of-doors, the dogs pushing by his legs as he did so, and careering off into the storm—and the storm was thick and blinding. Meloon returned immediately and lighted a lantern; with this in his hand he started in earnest. Mrs. Armstrong hurried down to the door and screamed something after him, what, he did not know, and he could not return a second time to find out.

The dogs ran hither and thither, darting back as if to ask the man if he were coming. The wind came down through snowy gorges in long, keen breaths, then gathered itself for short, sharp buffets against the tall, unwavering figure that went steadily on, swinging the glimmering light from its left hand and planting a long, tough hickory staff in the snow at each step with his right hand.

Meloon's heart was heavy within him. Emotions he was continually smothering were as continually rising up into vivid life. One temptation came to him so incessantly that at last it seemed to take shape in the form of a face which smiled and jeered at him. But he kept walking. The snow was drifting in great piles, leaving some places with only the old snows.

He went, without hesitation or swerving, down the lane that led to the sheep-pasture; up over the hill and down into the valley where the old mill-stream ran, across the next lot where the white birches grew. Two miles of this "cross lots" led to the road which went to the station, now five miles away. If a man were to walk to the railroad station from the Meloon farm, this is the way he would naturally go. Therefore, Meloon had not hesitated as to the course he was to take. He found out in one moment that the snow had already fallen sufficiently to hide any tracks; indeed, looking behind him, he saw his own footsteps obliterated even as he watched; or sometimes one mark was left clear, the snow swirling away from it as if intentionally.

He knew the country so well that he was able to keep in the path the sheep made, but a snow-storm in the night is more bewildering than to be placed in a strange country.

Meloon had left the low land, and was half-way up the sheep-pasture hill, when he saw the first evidence that Hildreth had not changed his mind; but why should he change his plan, since he would not expect to be followed until morning, if ever? And what reason should there be to follow? He was not clearly aware of the full nature of the note he had left in his room. When he had written it the dominant thought in his mind had been to get to the station in time for that train—in point of fact, he hardly knew how much of anything else he had written down.

And he also knew well the path across the sheep-pasture. The old snow had long ago formed a hard crust over which a man might walk. The dogs made sallies in different directions, but mostly they kept near the path which they had traversed so many times; therefore, aided by their knowledge as well as his own, Meloon did not travel many rods out of his way as he went across the pasture-lands.

But it was hard work, and he had always the thought with him that Hildreth might not have been so well able to keep near the right way. Meloon faithfully watched for footsteps; once his lantern revealed two marks pressed into the new-fallen snow, and which the after-coming storm had freakishly refrained from covering. Then he went on more confidently.

On the farther slope of the sheep-hill the wind took him as if it had been a giant lying in wait. It struck him a good buffet full across the chest, and made him turn his back suddenly and stand still to recover breath.

Another giant was in waiting there also, one which caught at him and whispered again that he was a fool to take all these pains. For what? For that which stood between him and happiness. But Meloon shook this power off as well as the other, and went straight on. It was a hand-to-hand fight with the northeast gale from now on to the end. You who have struggled with a snow-storm in northern New England, when the hard particles strike your face like little red-hot needles, and the wind suffocates, know what these four miles of solitary road were; and the mercury falling steadily.

It was a long journey, and a hard one, but Meloon was used to hardness. When he came to the four corners, where a guide-board pointed the way, he faced round to leeward and at last extracted his watch from his pocket and held it to the lantern light. It was a quarter to four; he was just one mile from the station; and in forty minutes the train was due. Perhaps he would find Hildreth there. If he had not fallen by the way, Hildreth would be there—perhaps he had fallen—perhaps he had used that pistol. What could be expected of an emotional, womanish being like Hildreth?

Meloon stood quiet, leaning against the guide-board post. He was trying to breathe regularly and without that sobbing tendency which the storm induced. When he started again he had no time to lose if he wished to reach his journey's end before the train came. He felt sore and indignant. Why should he have this care over that man? But he couldn't throw off the care, it was laid upon him.

Now he started out again; he took a slow, steady pace, which he maintained until, in the thickness of the storm, he saw the shining of the lamp at the railway station.

He pushed at the door; it stuck in its frame; he pushed again, and staggered into the little room, where a red-hot cylinder stove made the atmosphere such that for an instant it was to Meloon as if his windpipe was suddenly shut across. He gasped. The agent, dozing in a chair by the stove, stood up quickly, half awake.

"What? Eh? Oh, Mr. Meloon, that you? Goin' on this train?"

"No. Where's your passenger?"

"My passenger? Thunder, Meloon, you look 's if you'd walked—you look fit to drop."

"Isn't Hildreth here?"

"The young feller that's a singer—that's been livin' with you?"

"Yes—yes."

"No; I 'ain't seen him. What you talkin' about?"

Meloon had dropped into a chair, and now sat with his head thrown back, looking at the agent.

The bits of ice on his mustache were melting and running down across his lips; he thrust up an impatient hand and brushed them away. He had an appearance as if he would seize the man at the other side of the stove and shake him.

"He thought of taking this down-train," returned Meloon. "You've been asleep; you wouldn't know if he were here."

As he spoke he glanced keenly about the little bare room.

The agent's curiosity sprang up in full-fledged life.

"He's got a right to take this train, 'ain't he, then? What you want to stop him for? Has he be'n robbin' you?"

"Robbing me?—no. But I must see him. I want to make sure—" Here Meloon paused. He had been going to say, "to make sure he is safe," but the eager inquisitiveness of the face on the other side of the stove stopped him. He finished, calmly, "I must see him before he goes."

"I guess you'll have a chance, for he ain't goin' to take this train, I should say; it's comin' now."

The man was hurriedly drawing on a fox-skin coat and turning the collar up over his ears. "Awful cold," he announced. In the sound made by the storm was now heard a different noise, the continuous rumble of the coming locomotive.

"Train's late, anyway; didn't know but 'twould git stalled somewhere."

But Meloon did not hear this remark. He had gone out again, followed by the dogs, whose jaws hung open as if it had been a summer day.

Meloon darted around the bit of a building, which was surrounded by a piazza. He saw nothing but the wall of moving snow. Then he took his station close to the edge of the platform. He would see if any one boarded the cars. The agent was now out with his lantern. The black engine came sliding and crunching over the rails, dragging the long train of whitened cars; a snow-covered brakeman leaned out, looking ahead; the conductor jumped to the platform and ran along, swinging his arms, slapping his chest.

"Board!"

Meloon saw the conductor throw up his hand at the watching engineer, then the squeak and crunch and slide began again, and the train, like the wraith of a train, had gone on. Surely no one had entered a car.

Meloon stood still, even after the agent had gone back into the hot room. No one had boarded the train, but in the whirling snow far ahead he thought a figure had alighted; he forgot that fancy, however, in the crowding apprehensions that filled his mind. Perhaps Hildreth had used his revolver instead; and Meloon felt himself to be Hildreth's keeper. He could not shake off that conviction, that he was Hildreth's keeper.

He turned about and entered the station again; the agent was in the little closet where he sold tickets, but there was some one standing by the stove. Somebody tall and slight, and so enveloped in furs that at first it was difficult to tell whether the stranger was a tall boy or a woman.

XLIV

TWENTY-EIGHT BELOW

MELOON advanced; he was preoccupied; he was not thinking of this stranger. The dogs had been shut out; they now scratched violently on the door, and Meloon opened it. Lotos shot in tumultuously and flung himself on that fur-wrapped figure, which knelt to receive him, crying and sobbing with him.

Meloon walked to the stove and stood looking down at the group. Billy had pushed back her fur hood and some locks of hair fell over her forehead; she was flushed and tearful, but the man saw that her face was thin, the eyes large and sunken.

"You?" he said, at last.

Still on her knees, Billy looked up.

"You couldn't have been expecting me," she responded.

"No—no."

Meloon seemed to have given himself up to gazing at her.

"Then how came you here?" she asked.

She rose. Lotos sat down and pressed against her foot.

He did not reply. He took a step forward and said:

"Let us greet each other properly—let us shake hands."

Billy's gloves lay on the floor. She extended her hands and Meloon took them. The two looked at each other for an instant in silence. Then Billy said:

"I saw you before the train stopped; I saw you by the light of the lantern. I—I was glad; I was glad."

Her voice was almost inaudible.

Her companion did not speak; he still held her hands. Then he dropped them and turned away. He stooped over Trooper, who was panting and slobbering close to the stove. His own hand, as he put it on the dog's wet head, trembled slightly. For the next moment he seemed to be giving his entire attention to the attempt to holding himself steady. Just now you would have said he was a man of iron; he thought he had need to be.

"Is my mother well?"

"Yes."

"Sometimes I believe in Providence."

This was apparently irrelevant. Meloon glanced at her. He was keenly conscious of the presence of that man in the ticket-closet. The next moment the man came out with a key in his hand; he reluctantly announced that "he'd got to look after some barrels in the freight-house; there was always some darn thing to see to in the freight-house."

He opened the door after he had shut it, opened it apparently for the purpose of seeing if those two had run away. He supposed that that must be the opery-singer he had heard had been living at Meloon's; he thought that he kinder liked her face; he resolved to have a good look at it presently. And how curiously she and Meloon had shaken hands—just grabbed each other—perhaps that was the way they did in opery. And Meloon's eyes had shone—why, what was there goin' on, anyway?—and where was that opery-feller that was lost? He would hurry back and ask a few questions.

By the little red-hot cylinder stove the man and woman stood in silence for an instant. Then Billy said:

"I must believe in Providence to-day—is it day or night?—for here I come unexpectedly in this dreadful storm, and I find you here—you!"

She smiled slightly; her face had a way of looking singularly care-free when she smiled as she did now. She puzzled Meloon in that she could look in this manner.

"That is not so strange as that I should find you —when I believed you to be in England."

Billy was gazing at him intently.

"Your face is worn," she began, not appearing to pay any attention to what he had just said. "I have remembered it as strong and—and noble. I have remembered every expression. I know that little line on the left side of your chin that deepens when you are amused and are going to laugh. You look as if you had not laughed in all the time I've been gone. It's been a long while, hasn't it? Days, and weeks, and months that I've been away. Mr. Meloon, has it been long to you?"

"Yes—yes."

Would he be obliged to ask her to stop talking in this way?

She extended her hands over the top of the stove; he saw that they were thin, and that they wore no rings. His eyes fastened upon them.

"I'm glad that it has seemed that way to you, for I wanted you to think so. You're sure mother is quite well?"

"Certainly, she is well."

He was waiting for her to inquire for Hildreth, and presently she said:

"I suppose Vane is with you?"

"He has been with me all the time, until—"

"I wonder why people are allowed to make such mistakes as I made," she interrupted. "Really, it did not seem my fault."

She pressed one hand over her eyes for an instant; Meloon saw the sorrowful, tender expression of her lips below that hand. He walked to the farther end of the room; he hurried back. He felt as if she were requiring him to be, indeed, a strong man.

Now when she met his gaze after she had removed her hand, he thought her eyes wavered curiously; but the next instant they had grown steady again.

She returned to what he had just said, and which she had not appeared to notice.

"Vane was with you until—what do you mean by until?"

"Until this morning, or last night. He said he couldn't stay any longer. I was looking for him—I came here to see if he took this train; I thought he meant to take it. I am anxious about him."

Instead of becoming anxious also, Billy said, quickly:

"You are taking care of Vane, too. You are just what I have thought you were. As for me, I am nothing—nothing. I became tired of singing, so tired of having people grow wild over me, and of seeing and smelling all the flowers they sent me—just deadly tired of the whole thing. So I ran away. I broke my contract, but I can pay for that."

Here she smiled, and that peculiar look showed in her eyes again.

Meloon came nearer; he took her hand and drew it through his arm.

"Perhaps it would be better for you to sit down," he said. He led her to a chair and she placed herself in it. She continued gazing up at him.

"Have you lost your voice?" he asked.

"Oh no," with a slight eagerness of manner; "my voice is fine. It was never so magnificent as now. Listen, and judge for yourself."

She threw back her head and began to sing:

"'In this world, the Isle of Dreames,
While we sit by Sorrow's streames,
Feares and terrors are our themes,
Reciting . . .'"

She had spoken truth. In the gloomy, hot room the tones rang clear, and true, and dramatic.

But when she had sung the last note her head drooped. Meloon took her in his arms in time to prevent her from falling to the floor. She smiled into his face, grew yet whiter, then closed her eyes.

He stood there holding her for a moment before the station-agent returned.

"Gracious!" cried that person, running forward. "She 'ain't fainted, has she? It's the Armstrong gal, ain't it? Her mother lives to your house, don't she?"

"Yes, yes; can't you bring a glass of water?"

"I'll fetch some snow; the last water froze up 'n' bu'st the pail, 'n' I thought I wouldn't try it ag'in till it moderated."

The man ran out and returned with his hands full of snow. Meloon took some and pressed it on Billy's forehead and wrists. He sat down, holding her in his arms.

"I wish you'd get a horse and cutter here right away," he said. "I'm afraid she's going to be ill."

"You wouldn't take a horse out in this storm, would you?" in surprise.

There was some savageness in Meloon's manner as he replied:

"Yes, I'd kill the horse if necessary. She must be taken to her mother. I don't care what I pay for it. We go before the wind on the way home."

The man turned away; he knew he must obey that command, and he resolved to offer his own horse; Meloon was so masterful you couldn't argue with him.

Meloon sat perfectly still with his burden when the agent had gone. He applied the melting snow for a moment longer before Billy opened her eyes. When she had looked in his face she dropped her lids again, as if she were at peace. She raised one arm and placed it on his shoulder, moving a little nearer to him; she did not try to speak.

After a time the sound of bells approaching became audible—old-fashioned, clanging bells instead of the modern jingling ones. They paused at the rear of the building, and then the agent came in puffing and stamping his feet, snow on his shoulders and sifted over him.

"Here's my team," he announced; "you'll have to drive yourself; I wouldn't go seven miles for seven thousand dollars in this storm. My wife says you'd better come over there 'n' stay till it clears up. She'll do the best she can by the gal."

Meloon did not hesitate. "I'll take her home while I can. Her mother is there—she'd better be there."

"Jes' 's you say, of course; but you'll find it tough

—'n' mercury goin' down all the time. It can't snow much longer if it keeps on growin' cold, that's one thing about it; but the snow 'll blow 'n' be 'bout 's bad. Here's her hood."

He picked up the sealskin hood that had fallen to the floor. Billy, who, though she had seemed to recover from her faint and had her eyes open, made no remark, and was entirely passive.

Meloon placed the hood on her head, and then she raised her hands and tied the strings, doing it mechanically, as if she were not aware of her own movement.

"You're takin' a thunderin' resk, now, I tell ye, Mr. Meloon," remarked the man; "I hate to see ye do it."

"Are there plenty of robes in the cutter?" inquired the other.

"Crammed full; 'n' my wife has tucked in two jugs of b'ilin' water, besides a hot brick for the gal to hold in her lap."

Meloon rose and went to the door, which the agent threw open. A blast of fine snow struck them full in front. But they pushed forward.

"By George, you be set!" cried the man.

The horse was hitched to a post of the piazza, and the agent went to his head while Meloon put his burden on the seat and drew the fox-skins up about her. He ordered Lotos to lie down at his mistress's feet, and the dog gladly obeyed. All the time the snow was drifting over them.

"I do hate to have ye start," exclaimed the agent.

"Give me the reins," said Meloon.

The man flung the horse-blanket into the sleigh; he handed the reins.

"The mare c'n go," he said; "she c'n go in cold weather like the old Harry—'n' you needn't spare her. I'll be over some time 'fore night, if it clears, 'n' git her. Stiddy, there, now! She's a bright one, 'n' she'll keep to the road if anything can."

But no one heard the last sentence save the speaker of it.

The mare had darted forward, and the storm had swallowed up the cutter and its contents. The great St. Bernard dashed on behind.

The agent ran into the station and stood close to the red-hot stove. He stamped his feet, for his toes ached.

"I vow that Rawdon Meloon always was the most pig-headed critter I ever did see," he said, with some violence. "If he sets out to do a thing, he's bound to see it through. I say a feller 's got to have an awful sight of good judgment to be so set."

Presently he took his lantern and went to the north side of the building to examine a thermometer that hung there. He squinted at the line of mercury, hunching his shoulders against the wind.

"Twenty-eight below—it'll be lower 'fore its higher, I'll bet."

XLV

AS SAFE AS IN HEAVEN

MELOON sat with his head canted to one side, his heavily mittened hands holding the reins, while the spirited little mare fled along the drifted way, jerking the cutter violently up and down as it went over hummocks and down into thank-you-ma'ams. They flew on before the wind as if driven by it. In a momentary parting of the drift three stars were visible, bright, clear, unpitying. Yes, it was too cold to storm; the icy particles that filled the air were not coming from above now. But it was cold; even though the wind was behind them, it was cold.

"Where are we going?"

The sleigh was sliding over a level space between two hills. Apparently the mare had thus far kept to the road, but her driver could not see plainly enough to guide her in the least, and there was no track. Still, horses bred in this hilly region were wise creatures; one might trust in them to a wonderful degree, and be justified in that trust.

There was at first no reply to that question, and it was repeated.

"Home" was the answer. Meloon did not turn his head. He watched incessantly on both sides, and he was sometimes rewarded by a flying glimpse of a few stones that he knew belonged to an old wall, or the sprawling arms of a stump-fence in some low space of ground between hills. These things darted by him as if he were dreaming. He was so familiar with every square foot of land, every object for miles around, that a glimpse told him exactly where he was. At the foot of Blackberry Hill—three miles more to go. The man took heart of grace. He hoped that his companion would not speak; the hearing of her voice made it more difficult for him to keep what watch was possible. There was a corner in a quarter of a mile; he was quite sure that the mare would want to turn this corner, for that road led behind the mountain to another highway by which the animal could reach her home. As she approached this turn her driver could feel her lower herself and stretch away still faster over the packed snow which upheld the sleigh's runners.

"I've longed to be at home," said Billy, from among the furs which were heaped on her.

Meloon shuddered; it seemed to him that there was a curious tone in her voice, as there had been a curious flicker in her eyes. No matter, he was bound to take her in safety.

"You'll like to have me at home?" she said, interrogatively.

"Yes, I shall like to have you there."

"I'm glad of that; I know you wouldn't say that to me if it were not strictly true. I can believe everything you tell me—everything."

No response. The mare was flying up towards the corner. Meloon flung himself forward on the reins, and he needed all his strength to keep her straight ahead. She strained away to the right, determined to turn, and her driver was as determined that she should not turn. It was the driver who conquered; but the mare, disgusted, threw out her hind legs and sent her iron-shod feet crashing through the thin dashboard, which splintered and fell apart. Lotos sprang up, growling; Billy laughed.

"I know that corner," she said. "Doesn't it lead behind the mountain?"

"Yes. Are you warm?"

"Of course; why shouldn't I be? You would take care of me, anyway."

She spoke like a child.

"God knows I would," he returned, solemnly.

The strain on arms and attention was relaxed; the mare's pace slackened. The mountain was now between them and the force of the gale, and it would shelter them for the rest of the way. The glimpses of the stars became more frequent—far, and cold, and cruel they looked, as stars do look with a thermometer thirty below zero.

"Perhaps Vane will come back, as he did before."

Billy appeared to be giving utterance to a thought rather than to be addressing her companion.

Vane! Meloon knew with a pang that he had forgotten Hildreth as completely as if he could never remember him again.

"Has Vane been happy here?" asked Billy.

"How can I tell? No; he has not been happy. What person among us is happy?"

"Oh, do you ask such a question as that, Mr. Meloon? It's wrong to ask that when here I am. I'm happy. Why, when I was singing over there there used to come suddenly before me a picture of the farm, and the mountains around it, and the sky above it, and the audience would melt away while I sang to the picture before me. And you were always in the picture—you, Mr. Meloon. I sang to you more than to any one. Did you hear me?"

"Yes, I heard you," he answered, in a low tone. Then he said, more distinctly: "Don't talk, Billy. You're tired."

"Oh no, I'm not tired in the least. I'm so happy to be back here that I couldn't possibly feel tired. And here is Lotos with me—dear old Lotos."

Her voice was low, but it reached Meloon's ears. It seemed to him that he was holding a far sterner check over his own heart than over the animal he was driving—he wished that he might in some way curb himself with a hard hand, a hand that should hurt him.

"I thought that the boat would never get across the ocean," went on Billy; "it just crawled, and the hours would not pass. You know I didn't have Bashy with me; Bashy didn't know I was coming. She has been saying to me all the time that I never sang so well; that I was silly not to care more for my singing; but I couldn't seem to care after the very first, though I tried—I did really try."

As there was no response, Billy became silent, but she could not keep silent long. Her mind was running happily on different subjects, and she was disposed to talk.

"There was another thing," she began again, "that made me want to come back to this country; I cared a great deal about this reason while I was over there, but somehow I don't think much about it now. That's because I've found you, Mr. Meloon. It is as if a lovely peace had settled upon my soul—to find you. I was wondering how it would be when I reached the station; it stormed so that I was afraid that I couldn't get any one to take me over to the farm. Then I said to myself, 'I will walk.' I believed that the Lord would help me to get there some way. I didn't know He was sending you there; if I had known that I wouldn't have worried. I was afraid of making a mistake. I did make a mistake; I landed yesterday in New York. I was thinking—thinking of you, Mr. Meloon; you're always in my thoughts. I meant to take the train for Boston and then come up here, but—it was strange, wasn't it?—I went into the wrong car, and I've been to Albany; that's why I came on a down-train. My thoughts were confused part of the time, so that I didn't always quite know what I was doing. But now my mind is as clear—just as clear. And so is my voice." She hummed:

"'Night wind, whispering wind,
Wind of the Carib sea!
The palms and the still lagoon
Long for thy coming soon—'"

"Trooper looks like a great bear loping along in the road, doesn't he?" she broke off; "the snow covers him so that you can't see his color. What if there were wolves, Mr. Meloon, and they should come running after us, would you throw me out so that you might escape?—as the woman threw out her children in that dreadful story. Would you?"

Mr. Meloon felt his companion move towards him. He glanced at her, and could just see her eyes shining from among her wraps.

"No," he answered, knowing that she would insist upon his replying; "I would not throw you out."

"Not even to save your own life?"

"Not to save my own life. You are—" But Meloon did not finish his sentence.

Billy laughed with an inflection of sheer gayety.

"I was sure you wouldn't. I'm as safe with you as if I were in heaven."

"Luckily, there are no wolves," remarked Meloon, in a matter-of-fact tone.

He chirruped to the mare, whose speed had abated since she had passed the corner. He was asking himself if he should ever reach his home. Would she go on talking?

Another pause. Then Billy said:

"There's something else—but did I tell you that? Did I?"

"Perhaps; I can't say."

The mare seemed to be merely dragging over the snow; her driver slapped the lines on her back, reaching forward as if he would lift her along. He felt that even his strength would not enable him to bear this much longer.

"I've been wanting to tell you," she resumed, "how I've missed the letters. I don't mean those from all sorts of people; I don't care for them any more. It's the type-written ones that used to come every day. I used to live on them—they sustained me. It wasn't so much what there was in them as that they suggested hope, and courage, and the possibility of a life higher than I could grasp alone. Vane knew about them; sometimes he read them, but he wasn't interested in them. Are you listening, Mr. Meloon?"

"Oh yes."

"And are you interested?"

"I'm deeply interested."

"That makes me so glad. I don't want to bore you, you know."

She paused; it was as if she were smiling to herself in the silence. Instead of going on, she began to sing again in the same half-voice she had used a few moments before:

> "'Cold and fair
> Sits she there
> Calling the tides.'

That's the moon, you know. Is there a moon to-night? I've often wondered how it is that the moon calls the tides. Don't you ever wonder about that, Mr. Meloon?"

"Yes, often. Really, you ought not to talk; you should rest."

"Oh, but I am resting—for the first time since I left the farm last. I was born in the country, and it's there I love to live. Did you ever hear this?"

She sang:

> "'O, Helen fair, beyond compare!
> I'll make a garland for thy hair,
> Shall bind my heart forever mair,
> Until the day I die.'

That's fair Helen of Kirconnell. It's something I sang one night when—but, do you like this better:

> "'How is it wi' my gay goss-hawk,
> How is it wi' my doo?'

'Twas Mary Stuart who sang that; or was it—but it makes no difference—I'm sure that she couldn't sing as well as I can. When I was alone I used sometimes to chant something—perhaps you know it:

> "'Behold, when thy face is made bare, he that loves thee shall hate;
> Thy face shall be no more fair at the fall of thy fate.
> For thy life shall fall as a leaf, and be shed by the rain;
> And the veil of thine head shall be grief, and the crown shall be pain.'

That's sad, I suppose. But I don't feel that I shall ever be sad again, now I've found you. Perhaps I sha'n't even miss those letters. You said mother was very well?"

"Yes."

"Why, the storm is gone—does the wind blow as hard now? And it seems as if day is coming. The sun will shine since I'm with you. Is that the house? Mother has a light. Did she know you were going after me? But, no; you didn't know it yourself. How good it is to be happy again! I feel as if there were a beautiful fire running through my veins. Let me get out and hurry to mother. There she is."

Meloon had stopped the steaming mare in front of the house, and at the same time the door was thrown open, and Mrs. Armstrong appeared with a lamp in one hand while the other held a shawl over her head.

"That you, Rawdon?" for her own light blinded her, and she knew that Meloon had started out on foot.

"You found him?"

Billy was trying to throw off her many wraps.

"Let me help you," said Meloon, in a low voice.

"You've got him, I see," from the doorway. "Well, I *am* thankful."

"No, no; I didn't find him. I must go again."

Meloon had stepped out into the snow. He was trying to prevent Billy from essaying to walk; but she would make the attempt. She swayed, but he took her in his arms and carried her up to the door, Mrs. Armstrong backing away as he came forward, whispering, stridently:

"Oh, 'tain't really Miny, is it? It can't be—no, it can't be!"

"Yes, 'tis Miny," said the daughter. "I could have walked in well enough—" She rose from the chair in which Meloon had placed her by the hearth. "I'm perfectly well, and so glad—so glad. I want to live in the country—I want—"

She was smiling in a blissful way as she ceased speaking and put her hand to her head.

XLVI

AT THE FARM-HOUSE

IT was her mother who took her in her arms now and half-carried her to the couch in the room. Mrs. Armstrong put her on the couch and knelt down beside her. Without taking her eyes from the face on the pillow, the elder woman said:

"I wish you'd go right after the doctor, Rawdon."

Meloon came and stood over the two women for an instant, gazing down at the younger one, who was not unconscious, apparently, though her eyes were closed. She was still smiling, and she looked perfectly happy, as she had said that she was. Meloon's hands hung clinched at his side. His features were rigid.

He turned away and left the room; he took his lantern and led the mare to the barn. Every movement he made told. It was not five minutes before the mare was standing in the place of a horse which Meloon was harnessing into the sleigh. He stepped in and drove to the door again.

"I'm going," he said. "Is there anything I can do first?"

"Put Miny on the bed in the next room. I'm going to try to give her a sweat while you're gone. I've got to do something, or I shall be crazy. I can't ask you a thing now. She's goin' to be dretful sick, I do believe."

"You'll do what you can. I shall telegraph to Hartwell, of Boston. He can come in the first train. He can get here almost as soon as the doctor from Plymouth."

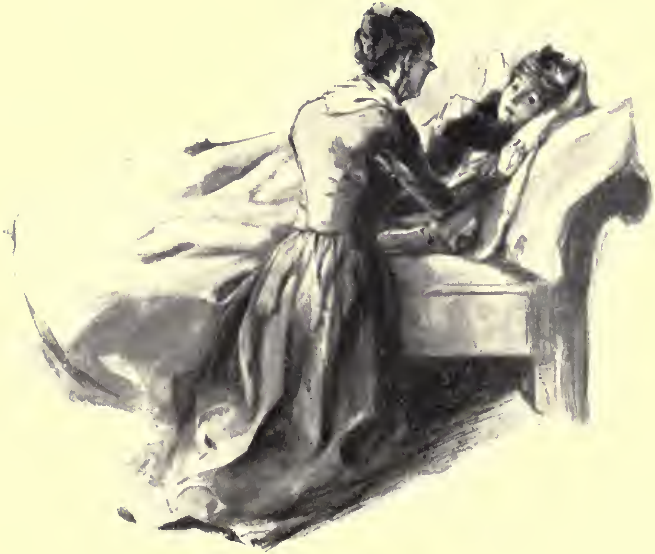
Meloon had put Billy down on the bed in the next room; she clung to him and murmured something about being "so glad." He turned abruptly away and drove off instantly. Trooper followed him, but Lotos stayed; he was sitting by the bed watching everything. Once, when Mrs. Armstrong had gone to the kitchen, the dog leaped on the bed and stood over Billy's face, whining and palpitating, and giving quick dabs on her cheeks with his tongue. She looked at him with a shining haze over her eyes; she stretched out her arms and clasped him about the neck.

"I love you true," she said. "And now we'll all be happy together."

When Mrs. Armstrong brought in a bowl of steaming herb-tea, Lotos was lying with his little grizzled length extended and his head on the pillow by his mistress.

Meantime, as Meloon drove along over the white road, the wind fell before the coming of the sun. He saw the stars fade in the steel-blue of the sky; the smoke that rose from the houses here and there on the hills and in the valleys went up in a straight, beautiful column. There came a glow far off on the edges of the reaches of snow, a glow that grew stronger and stronger, and then the sun came up on the eastern edge and struck a sharp dazzle, as of swords suddenly unsheathed, across the whole country.

Meloon's eyes roved everywhere; he saw keenly the miracle of the new day, but his mind remained closed. His heart was beating to one question as



"MRS. ARMSTRONG KNELT BESIDE HER"

his horse rushed on; the question was, "Will she live? Will she live?"

Two or three times he made an attempt to rouse himself and shake off that question that he fancied was tolling, as if it were a bell, in his consciousness.

Trooper galloped over the snow-crust at the roadside.

Meloon was going right back over the track he had just travelled, for this was the way to the nearest telegraph-station.

The agent was just locking the door preparatory to returning to his home for the next two hours. If a person wanted to send a telegram from this part of the country he must want to do it enough to fight against difficulties.

"Hullo!" cried the man; "you back? I swow you must like to sleigh it better 'n I do, with the glass down to thirty. Where's my mare?"

"Safe in my stable; but she was tired; so I came back with my own horse. Open that door again; I want to send a message."

"You do? Where to?" coming forward on the platform.

"Boston. Open the door, quick."

Meloon jumped from the cutter and flung a blanket over his horse.

"Will he stand?" asked the agent.

"Stand?—yes."

He took the keys from the man's hand as he stood there; he fitted one into the lock and strode into the building where the stove was, in the same red-hot state.

"Now go ahead."

"Somebody sick?"

Meloon did not reply; he was writing on a form, which he immediately pushed forward. The man took his pencil and counted the words; then he read them slowly, with the voice of a machine:

R. S. Hartwell,
No. —— Commonwealth Avenue, Boston.

"Come up next train. Meet you at Quimby. Critical case. Must have you. Reply. Am waiting.

"R. MELOON."

"There's more 'n ten words. Can't you make it less? Save you money."

"No matter how many words there are—send 'em."

The agent deliberately counted them again.

"Have to charge you fifty cents," he said.

"Send 'em!" cried Meloon, with such a ferocity of manner that the machine began to click.

After a few moments the man turned and remarked that he guessed the answer 'd come 'fore night.

"Yes," said the other, with emphasis, "I think it will."

"I shall be goin' after my mare, 'n I'll take the answer."

"No; I'll wait. Don't you know I telegraphed that I'd wait?"

"Oh, wall, I s'posed that was a mere figger of speech."

"I shall sit here, and you'll have to stay here, too. If I don't hear within an hour, I shall wire again."

Meloon sat down by the stove and crossed his legs, clasping his hands over his knee. His face was sharpened in some strange way, and set.

The agent gazed at him in silence for a moment, then he made the remark that "telegraphin' was dretful expensive business; he couldn't afford it. When his wife's mother was visitin' them, 'n' his wife had had to go to the Weirs for a week, 'n' his wife's mother was taken with her last sickness, he didn't telegraph—that was 'fore he was agent—he didn't think he could afford it. Ike Holt was goin' to the Weirs in two days, 'n' he waited 'n' sent by Ike. His wife come home 's quick 's she got the word, but her mother died 'fore she got there."

Meloon sat perfectly still. No one could have told whether he had heard what the man was saying.

The agent came round and stood at the other side of the stove. He opened a damper, then lifted the cover by the wire attached to it, gazed judicially at the glowing coals, then replaced the cover and closed the damper, after which he looked at Meloon again, and said to himself that this man was the settest feller he ever seen; he should hate to be so set as one of them Meloons. He wondered if it was because the male Meloons had been college-bred for so many generations. It must cost a sight of money to go to college.

After half an hour the agent put coal into the stove and announced that he had an "arrant" at the house and would run over.

Without turning his head, Meloon said, shortly:

"No; you'll stay here."

The man spat into the box of sawdust that stood by the stove; he spat again in an excited manner, and then said that it was understood by the company that, as the trains were few, he should be able frequently to run over to the house; and it was probable that his wife would by this time need some wood sawed and split—he hadn't sawed and split so much as common that morning owing to that gal—was it the gal who was sick?

Meloon nodded shortly.

"Was them Armstrong women any relation?"

"No."

"I've be'n meanin' to ask that for a good while, but I 'ain't had a chance, or if I did have a chance I forgot to ask. A feller forgits to ask lots of things."

He walked uneasily about the room. He began to wish that Meloon would move.

"Won't it cost dretfully to have a doctor come up from Boston?"

Meloon nodded again. He set his face harder than ever. This, too, must be borne.

"Hartwell and I were at college together," he said, at last.

"Oh; then I s'pose you c'n git him cheaper."

Meloon sat quiet for another space; then he looked at his watch.

"It's time to wire again. Find out whether the other found him. He may be off; we must track him. Begin."

Meloon passed the whole forenoon in that little air-tight room, save that twice he unhitched his horse and drove him a short distance, then returned and again covered the animal with his blanket, re-entering the room with the same hard, inscrutable face and stiff bearing.

At twenty minutes to twelve the clicking began to sound, and the discouraged agent read off the message:

"*Meloon,*
Quimby, New Hampshire.

"Message just found me at Charlestown. Coming on 12.10 train. HARTWELL."

Meloon's eye ran over the lines; then he thrust the scrap of paper into his pocket. He could go home and come back again

"If I had my mare here I could let your doctor take her," remarked the agent.

"But she isn't here. I'll be on time."

He was stepping into the cutter when he heard this question:

"Has she got anything ketchin'?"

He did not reply.

When he drew up again at his own door no one met him. He entered softly. He heard a voice speaking incessantly, but there was a happy cadence in it. He followed the sound to the room where he carried Billy a few hours before. The sunlight was streaming in, and lying on the bed and on Billy and Lotos, for the dog was curled up on his mistress's shoulder on the outside of the clothes.

Mrs. Armstrong sat close by. She turned quickly.

"Oh, ain't the doctor come yet?" she cried.

Meloon shook his head as he advanced.

"I couldn't find him at first. He starts on the 12.10 train."

"Then it 'll be almost night 'fore he gets here. It didn't do any good to sweat her. She knows you, don't she? Don't you think she knows you? Oh, what has she be'n through to bring her to this?"

Billy had fixed her eyes on Meloon's face, and as she met his glance she smiled; indeed, her eyes seemed smiling all the time, though her lips were serious.

"Yes. Why shouldn't I know Mr. Meloon?" she asked. "And I'm here in his house; it's his farm that I see from the window. But what puzzles me is why the whole opera troupe should be continually going by that window and singing—" Here she paused to laugh, looking at Meloon all the time. She laughed convulsively. As soon as she could speak, she said:

"They never stop singing this verse:

'Welcome, maids of honor;
You do bring
In the spring,
And wait upon her:
She has virgins many,
Fresh and fair,
Yet you are
More sweet than any.'

Hark! You hear them singing it now. And there they go wheeling by the lilac to come back by the syringa. They always go by the lilac to come back by the syringa. It's tiresome to hear that so much:

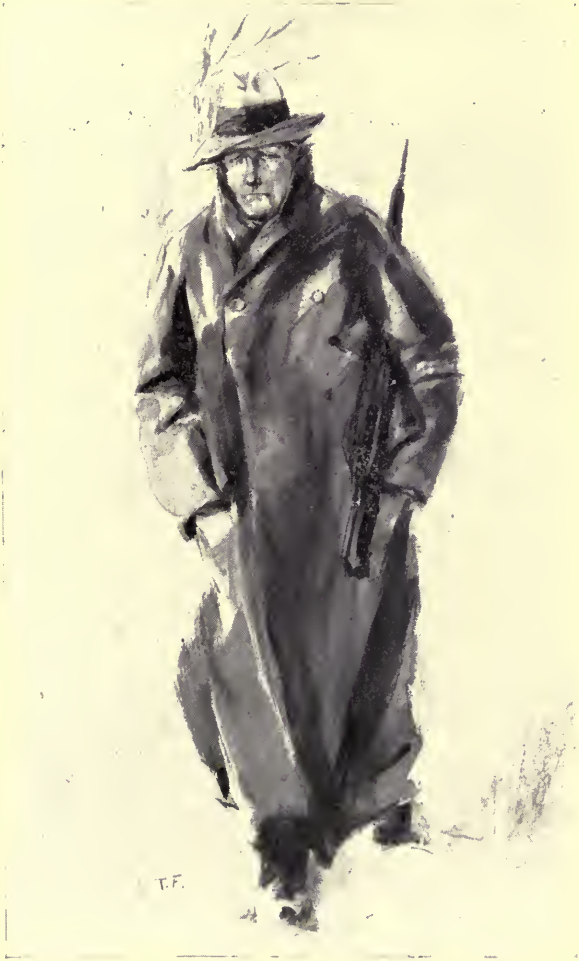
'Welcome, maids of honor;
You do bring
In the spring'—

Don't look unhappy, Mr. Meloon. I know you, and I know I'm here. I left England just to come here. Everything else is a kind of smudge—just as my slate used to look when I'd drawn something and then passed the palm of my hand over it—

'And wait upon her.
She has virgins many,
Fresh and fair,
Yet you are
More sweet than any.'"

She reached out her hand and Meloon took it. He knelt down by the bed, holding the hand fast; it was piteously hot, and the pulse at the wrist was leaping like some one hurrying for his life.

He forgot that any one else was present; he kissed the hand, then pressed his forehead down upon it.



THE DOCTOR

He felt that he was tasting of the bitterness of death.

Mrs. Armstrong did not notice him. She was arranging the pillows, and she was saying over again and again:

"How can we wait so long for the doctor?" and "What has the child been through? What has she been through?"

In a few moments Meloon drove away for the second time. He tried to think of Hildreth, but he could not keep his mind upon that subject; he could not awaken any interest in the question as to what had become of the young man. He knew that he cared for nothing but the welfare of the girl whom he had left beneath his roof.

This time he only waited ten minutes before the train came. He hardly spoke as Hartwell left the car, and the physician asked no questions then. They wrapped themselves up and drove in silence. Just before they reached the house Hartwell asked:

"It's a woman, I suppose?"

Meloon nodded.

"You care for her?"

"I care for her—but I have no right. Hartwell"—turning so that their eyes met—"if you have any skill, use it. You know I think very little of doctors, but I think a great deal of your power."

Hartwell smiled. He had a thin, close-shaven face, with small, bright eyes, eyes that one sometimes sees, that seem to combine the shrewdness of an animal with the intelligence of a human being.

XLVII

THE PRESCRIPTION

WHEN the two men entered the house Mrs. Armstrong came swiftly and silently forward. Behind her, and as if following her, was the low, continuous sound of talking—talking, and at the end of every few words a slight, bubbling laugh.

The mother caught hold of Hartwell's sleeve with both hands.

"Oh," she whispered, "are you the doctor?"

He nodded. He hastily and noiselessly threw off his outer coat. He advanced to the fire and held his palms towards the blaze. One could perceive that he was listening all the time. Mrs. Armstrong watched him with unswerving eyes. Meloon had gone to the door and was standing there; his face could not be seen.

Presently Hartwell walked into the bedroom and sat down in the chair the mother had left. Billy looked at him brilliantly.

"Are you a friend of Mr. Meloon's?" she asked.

He answered that they had been friends since they were in college together.

"Then I'm glad to see you."

The next instant she said, pleadingly, that she wished, since he had come, that he would order the troupe to change about at the syringa or the lilac;

she didn't much care which, only change about, somehow. Dr. Hartwell replied that he would attend to that. He sat leaning back in his chair in an easy attitude, watching the face on the pillow. Presently Billy began her low stream of words again, mingled with singing. She seemed very happy. Occasionally she glanced at the door as if seeking some one. Her mother stood at the foot of the bed.

"Where is Mr. Meloon?"

"Here I am," making a step which brought him within sight.

"I knew you were very near," she responded; "I knew it, because I'm so happy. Over there, across the water, I was so far away that I couldn't be happy. I used to think all the time that the ocean was between us, and I expected to die. I learned an epitaph. Don't you want to hear it? I meant to have it set to music some time, so that I might sing it. It's really about a dancing-girl, but I changed it to a singing-girl, and it makes good sense. Now, tell me if it doesn't. Listen."

She repeated, in a small voice:

"'Here I lie and sing no more:
Sayonara, sayonara!
With a tombstone for my door.
Here I keep unwonted state,
I that sang up to Death's gate,
Sayonara!

"'Long I sang; too long, too long:
Sayonara, sayonara!
Sang for you my foolish song.
Now I neither sing nor weep,
But 'mid iris roots I sleep,
Sayonara!

"'Oh, you paid my song with gold,
Sayonara!
Now a better wealth I hold:
Folded buds of silver lilies,
Golden buds of daffadillies,
Sayonara!'

There's some I can't remember, but it's no matter. Mr. Meloon, won't you lift me up higher in the bed? I keep slipping down so."

Hartwell glanced at his friend, who stood in the doorway. Meloon came and sat down on the edge of the bed; he drew Billy up so that she leaned against him.

"Perhaps I could sleep," she said. She closed her eyes, and very soon she was sleeping. Meloon sat motionless, and as time passed he began to ache in every joint; but he was like a rock. Hartwell went silently out of the room, and, turning, beckoned to Mrs. Armstrong, who began a whispered inquiry. But the doctor held up his finger and shook his head. He placed himself by the fire; Mrs. Armstrong hesitated; then she also sat down and made an effort to be still. She took her Bible and fixed her eyes on one of its pages. At last she found that she was reading these words: "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." After a time these words grew indistinct; the crackling of the burning wood on the hearth was all the sound there was. The mother, in spite of her anxiety, was asleep.

But Hartwell did not fall asleep. He sat looking into the flames, his gaze never losing its keenness. Twice within the half-hour he drew out his watch.

It was more than an hour before there was a sound in the next room. Then, without warning, the voice began again and the doctor rose directly. When he entered Meloon was just putting his burden down on the pillows, and Billy was saying:

"The letters? Why did they stop coming? Mr. Meloon, I haven't had one of those letters since I started for Europe. I've missed them so. It was silly to miss them so, and I tried not to care; but I couldn't help it—I just couldn't help it. I suppose that's a doctor you've brought—that friend of yours. But I don't need any medicine. Now I'm here, I need nothing. It's lovely to be so happy. When I have slept a little more I shall be perfectly well and can make butter again. I want to make butter. I don't care for singing—in public. I hate the public; and the flowers; and everything that I thought I loved—everything about the public, I mean."

Mrs. Armstrong was now sitting by her daughter, and the two men left the room. Meloon conducted his friend into the kitchen, where the great cooking-stove was hot with burning oak-wood.

"Well?" he said, facing round upon his companion and standing up like a soldier who expects a volley, but who will not flinch.

"Oh," responded Hartwell, easily, "you needn't worry. She will get well."

This was so different from what Meloon had anticipated that he suddenly lost that bravado strength, and it was all he could do to keep from trembling; but he did hold himself steady.

"I thought there was no hope," he said.

"On the contrary, it is all hope," replied the other. "Worn nerves, unhappiness, enormous excitement, no sleep to speak of; on the other side, youth, great recuperative power, and, a thousand times the greatest of all, the feeling that her ship has come into harbor here. She has fled to you as to a haven. She was better even after that sleep. Didn't you see that?"

Meloon shook his head.

"I was in despair," he answered.

"But she is rather an abnormal person," went on Hartwell. "These people with artistic temperaments and a tendency to genius of one kind or another rarely are normal; that's one of our recent discoveries, you know," smiling. "Perhaps you have kept up with the times enough to have learned that. I see you have. You pry into a lot of things here among these hills, don't you?"

The speaker walked to the window and then back again.

"She must sleep all she can," he went on. "She doesn't need a drop of medicine. Milk, eggs, and sleep—sleep. For a few days you might better go in there and hold her as you did just now; she feels your strength and is soothed. Don't oppose her. She loves you; if there's an obstacle, ignore it for the present, if you want her to live and keep her mind. I do hate to deal with one of these high-strung hyperæsthesia cases. Be sure you let her have her own way. Don't read her any moral lessons, and don't let her mother do it. See to that, mind. If anybody goes to preaching duty to her before she has recovered, I wouldn't give a penny for her chances. Otherwise, she'll do."

Again Hartwell walked across the room. This time when he returned he came close to his friend.

"I declare, Meloon, I don't envy you—you're in a hard place; and yet I do envy you. I'm not afraid that you'll go wrong. You always did have the stiffest backbone in our class, and I wasn't an invertebrate myself. You needn't tell me how it all happened. It's enough that it has happened. I suppose she's entangled with that tenor?"

"She's his wife."

"Eh? Oh, the devil! Bad as that? I didn't know but it was an engagement which the New England conscience had run against. If you were a doctor, Meloon, and saw what I see, I wonder what you'd think of conscience. I've half made up my mind that there isn't any right or wrong; we have different points of view, you know. It's all in that. But that's an old question, and it'll never be settled. Do you want me to stay until to-morrow? Very well, I will. But she's going to get up. Sleep—sleep—that's what she needs. That touch of delirium will be gone in twenty-four hours. You've no idea what a strain these women will bear." Silence for a moment. Then Hartwell went on again: "I knew her, of course. If I hadn't given up being surprised at anything, I should have been surprised at finding the Armstrong up here."

"You've heard her?"

"Heard her? I never missed a night when she sang in Boston. Her voice and her way of using it are delicious. I used to sit and listen, and forget all the people whose ills I was worrying about. And I used to wonder at her, too. She put a lot of her life-blood into her singing and acting. The public is a ravening wild beast—it wants life-blood—it licks its chops and shrieks for it. I've heard all the singers, and I must say I never was touched so deeply as by this one. But an artist pays terrifically for the use of a power like Miss Armstrong's."

The doctor became silent, but his eyes dwelt questioningly on his friend's face.

"I never quite fathomed you, Meloon, for all I knew you so well," he said, presently. "You might have been a strong factor among men, but you stuck to this farm."

"I liked sheep, and horses, and dogs better; and when I met Trooper as a pup, I wanted to make a good home for him."

Meloon's head was up, his eyes glowing. But the hand that pulled at the mustache was trembling with the relief its owner felt.

"You think because she is going to live that you don't care what else happens?"

As he spoke, the doctor went close to his friend and placed a hand on his shoulder. He continued: "Still, I suppose it would simplify matters if that woman in there should die—die now and be safely annihilated. Well," dropping his hand and turning away, "I've no idea what it means to be loved as she loves you. She is somehow like a child and a woman about it. As for love—pshaw! that's a mere physical phase to which the human animal is liable many times after adolescence. It's only phrase-making to call it anything but a physical sensation and demand. And yet—well, there is something confoundedly touching and—I'll say it *seems* spiritual—in her eyes when she looks at you. And the tenor is her husband? Meloon, you've got a hard part to play; and she won't help you at present; she simply can't help you until she becomes stronger. You just listen to me, Rawdon, and obey me. On your life, don't you let any question of right and wrong, and that kind of thing, influence you in your manner to her at present. If you're going in for that, wait. There'll be plenty of time. That's my only prescription—it's all that's necessary. Have you got a bit of cold meat and bread? I'm about starved. I caught the train, but I hadn't any time to eat."

Meloon brought out food. He brewed a cup of coffee and sat down opposite his friend. But he found it difficult to follow Hartwell's words, and soon the doctor gave up talking.

For the rest of the time the doctor sat in the sitting-room, often going to the bedside, but he said very little. Meloon, released from the hold of his most terrible anxiety, now found his mind going back to that other worry—what had become of Hildreth? But he would wait another day; and even after waiting, what should he do?

The next morning he drove his guest to the station. The cold still continued. The snow was of a bluish-white glare, the sky clear and hard; there was no wind. The station-agent came out of his ticket-closet and joined the two men by the cylinder stove.

"Thirty below this mornin' on the north side of the house," he announced, and he added that it was dretful weather to have sickness in the fam'ly.

"How's your folks, Mr. Meloon?"

"His folks are going to get well," said Hartwell, shortly.

When the train was coming he hurriedly repeated his advice to his friend.

"Mind, don't let her think about any insuperable obstacle. She must be happy for the next few weeks—until she is strong again. If she wants to make butter"—with a smile—"let her make it. And look out for that mother of hers and her conscience. In five days write to me about her."

The train moved off, and the agent, on the platform close to Meloon, asked, in a high-pitched voice:

"I s'pose it's thunderin' expensive to have a Boston doctor, ain't it, Mr. Meloon? Costs as much as five dollars, don't it? I ain't curious, but Tim Loomis—I told him about it—thought 'twouldn't be s' expensive. How was it?"

"I don't know."

Meloon walked to where he had hitched his horse. The boards creaked and snapped beneath him as he went. The horse's nostrils were covered with beads of ice, and his breath was a jet of steam. He was pawing steadily. The agent tucked the outer robe about Meloon's legs.

"When you do pay that doctor, I wish you'd let me know how much 'twas; I want to tell Tim Loomis."

Then the horse darted away.

XLVIII

PEACE

WHEN Meloon reached his home again, and came in from the barn, Mrs. Armstrong was on her knees in the kitchen. She rose as the master of the house entered. Her face was covered with tears.

"Is she worse?" with a peremptoriness that had something savage in it.

"Thank the Lord, no! She's asleep. She's be'n talking. She says she has all she wants now she's back on the farm. She says she doesn't care if she never sings a note in public. I've been giving thanks. I've been pouring my heart out. My prayers have been answered. Didn't that doctor leave any medicine?"

Meloon shook his head. He wondered if Serissa had always talked like this. She wandered irresolutely about the room before she stopped by the sink where her companion was washing his hands.

"Now," she said, "if we could only find Vane, how happy we might all be! 'Ain't you got any clew? You 'ain't? What shall we do, then? I s'pose he's gone off after her, 'n' when he don't find her he'll come back here, won't he? I expect if he would come things might be fixed up. I s'pose they may have had some kind of a quarrel—though Miny never was quarrelsome. She used to love him, sure. But it's no matter about anything, if she only gets well. I do think the doctor ought to have left some medicine. What you going to do next about Vane?"

Meloon's face was hidden by the towel, and behind its folds he asked:

"What would you do?"

But Mrs. Armstrong could not tell; she spoke of the select-men, but she spoke tentatively, and left the decision to some one else. In that short winter afternoon the man spent an hour sitting before the fire; Billy had asked if he objected to placing his chair so that she could see him as she lay on her bed if she opened her eyes. She made this request as a child might ask a favor, and it was granted in the same manner. Meloon sat in his big chair, with his head resting on the back; sometimes he would glance into the adjoining room, and his eyes would meet another glance from shining eyes. But at last Billy's lids drooped, and she slept, lightly at first, and often wakening and calling incoherently, but finally the sleep seemed deep and restful.

As for Meloon, his face was a study as he sat there; the strong features had a soft brilliance upon them; he was not ashamed when two tears fell upon the mustache; but he was careful that Billy should not see them. When she was asleep he rose and left the room. The thought of Hildreth, perhaps under some snowdrift, was mixed with every other thought. He started out for another search, and he did not return until long after night; stars and snow were, however, so bright that it was not dark. But he discovered nothing. The next morning he went again, and the next. He kept up these trips for a week. Sometimes he went out on foot, going on the crust of the snow into woods, down narrow valleys, up the hills, following streams, and always with the two dogs, who nosed curiously into places inaccessible to their human friend.

And all without result. Meloon had learned that Hildreth had not taken a train at the station at Quimby; that he had not, made the suspicion very strong that he might have perished in the cold and the storm. If he had found shelter at any farmhouse within miles the fact would surely be known.

Meloon took everybody round about into his confidence in regard to the missing man. He asked questions of all the people whom he met at the corners, so that in three days there was not a farmer within ten miles who had not a fancy, when he went logging, or even when he stepped out to his enormous wood-pile in the yard, that he might find a man's stiffened form under the snow. There was an unwonted excitement all over the neighborhood. The majority of the inhabitants protested that they would not be astonished at anything that should transpire concerning the "opery-feller" that Meloon had been hiring. "And what was an opery, anyway?" "Oh," said another, "it's a kind of a play where they sing at each other instid of jest chinnin', as they do in the theayter. My cousin Lyddy merried a man that had be'n once to opery; 'n' Lyddy told me what he told her."

This was comparatively direct testimony, and was received with interest and satisfaction. And the singing-girl had come back from nobody knew where, and Meloon had taken her home, where she was real sick. The station-agent had given a detailed description of her arrival at the station and of Meloon's meeting with her. She had been, of course, somewhat weak in the upper story—must have been, to have chosen to travel in a storm that was the worst that had been known in fifteen years. It was generally thought that Meloon was having his hands full. And he was odd himself; but it must be owned that there wasn't a better farmer in the county, though he was "luny" in some ways. Still, a man who knew how to raise fine cattle, and how to get good crops out of the land, was bound to be respected in the country-side, even though he was also decided to be luny.

So, for the time, Meloon gave up his search for Hildreth, not without a secret indignation that the young man should have been the cause of all this anxiety. Sometimes, as he rode or walked about, Meloon recalled that moment at the depot in Boston when he had thrust Hildreth forward in front of the coming engine—thrust him, but, with instantaneous repentance, pulled him back. Perhaps this man had never in his life thanked God so profoundly as he thanked Him for allowing repentance to come in time.

Within the farm-house there was sunshine through this cold time. Billy was still in bed; she lay there contentedly, smiling when she was awake, taking her food dutifully, sleeping much. In the morning her host came in to greet her. She would put out a hand, which he took and held an instant. She would ask him what he was going to do that day, and he would tell the precise spot where he and his men were going for logs, or for pulp-wood for the factory, and what oxen they would take. Then she would say:

"You'll come in and let me know what you've done when you get back?"

He would promise. All day she thought of where he was at work; she knew every locality on the large farm. She talked with her mother about the different places and how they must look with the snow everywhere.

"I knew I should be happy if I could only get here. I couldn't explain it to Bashy; but I would have asked her to come with me if I hadn't felt sure she was safe. I've had her on my mind, but I'm certain she'll go straight now. I left a note for her; I didn't want her to worry. What time do you think Mr. Meloon will be home, mother?"

"About the usual time, I suppose."

"I hope so. If he is late I begin to be afraid."

"You needn't; nothing will happen to him. I don't worry. He can take care of himself."

"I hope so. How strong he is!"

Billy would often examine her hands, as sick people will do.

"I'm going to see to the milk and cream when I get up," she said.

"But you'll get tired of that; you'll be crazy to sing again."

"No—never—never again." Mrs. Armstrong laid down her sewing; she fixed her eyes on the face on the pillow.

"Oh," she sighed, "I s'pose you think you mean that; but when you're up round, you'll change your mind, 'n' I shall have to go all through that once more."

"Have you suffered so much?" tenderly.

"I've suffered a lot."

"All that is over. I'll sing for you, and perhaps for Mr. Meloon, if he asks me; but on the stage—never."

Mrs. Armstrong began to cry softly.

"It's too good to be true," she said. "I ain't going to believe it yet. When you're well and strong, I tell you, it 'll all come again—the old longing. No, I ain't going to believe anything yet—though I have prayed so."

Billy was silent for a space. Her mother sewed, and Billy watched the needle. The pale sunshine came in at the window. Through the open door of the sitting-room the two could hear the crackling of the logs as they burned on the hearth. Everything seemed peace. Lotos and Trooper had gone logging.

"What is it about Vane?" Billy asked this question in a louder voice than she had been using, and she raised herself on her elbow as she waited for the answer.

"He's gone, you know. He hasn't sent us any word yet."

This was what the two elder people had agreed should be the answer to the question that was sure to be asked.

"Why did he go?"

"Do you think we'd better talk about that?"

"Yes, certainly. I must talk about it. Why did he go?"

Mrs. Armstrong threaded her needle before she spoke.

"We don't any of us know why he went. He got dreadful uneasy. He thought he wanted to stay here, but I s'pose he didn't. I must say he'd ought to have told us, so we shouldn't worry."

"You have worried, then?"

"Why, yes, of course."

"I'm to blame. I was hard to him."

Billy twisted her handkerchief in her fingers.

"Sh! Sh! We won't talk about it. All you've got to do now is to get well. When you're well mebbe he'll come back as sudden as he went."

"I want him to be happy, but I know he can't be happy with me. You needn't hush me, mother; and you needn't look so strange. If he comes back it won't be to me."

"Oh, Miny!"

"No. I'm going to stay here with you and work. Vane must go on with his singing."

"I've always thought—" having said this, Mrs. Armstrong paused with marked abruptness.

"What have you always thought?"

Billy was lying with her face turned towards her mother, with one hand under her cheek.

"I d' know 's I ought to tell you."

The speaker let her work drop in her lap.

"No matter whether you ought or not, you must."

"Well, I do s'pose a wife's place is with her husband."

No answer—instead, a very impressive silence.

"Don't you s'pose so, Miny?"

"That depends. All I know is that I shall never live with Vane again."

"Miny, I—"

"Mother, we won't talk about it. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I've been nearly dead with it. And I hurt Vane. I couldn't help it. I wouldn't let him go with me. No; I couldn't help it. And he was so grieved. It has all weighed upon me. I couldn't go on; it was no use. When I've talked about it this once with you I sha'n't mention it again. I mean to put my old life behind me—not that when I was a young girl, and was so happy on father's farm, or up at school in Holyoke, but since then—since I knew Miss Runciman. I've paid Miss Runciman. If I shouldn't live, I want you to remember that. When I began to sing over there in England I made a lot of money, but Bashy and I lived in cheap lodgings—I insisted on it—until I had sent Miss Runciman the last penny, and interest. What a load rolled off me! But there's one debt I shall never pay—a hundred dollars"—she paused, and then added, hastily, "but perhaps I never told you of that. It's no matter. I'm not going to talk about that. Oh"—her face growing bright—"everything is beautiful now I've come here. I knew it would be. And I can be such a good, unselfish woman. I'm never going to grieve you, mother, any more. I shall be really a good girl to you; and if Mr. Meloon will let us stay, we'll work, and have such a quiet, lovely life far from the madding crowd. How I hate the madding crowd that used to applaud and throw flowers at me. Let them throw flowers at some one else; I'm done with them. I'll pick my blossoms here among these mountains. How purple it looks over by The Notch to-day, doesn't it? I could almost think it is more beautiful among these hills in the winter than in the summer. To think that we may live in a place like this!"

The happy voice kept on for a few moments longer and then stopped, for the speaker had fallen asleep.

Mrs. Armstrong made an attempt to go on with her sewing, but her eyes were so dim that she dropped her work and sat looking, with that mist over her vision, at the placid face on the pillow.

XLIX

BY THE FIRESIDE

"HAS Mr. Meloon come home?"

Billy was sitting among pillows in a chair by the hearth-fire. She had left her bed now. There was a hint of pink in her face, and her hands did not have that heart-terrifying, pallid appearance; she did not look at them so much. Sometimes she held a book, but she did not read.

"Has Mr. Meloon come home?" She turned her head as she repeated the question. "Are you there, mother?"

Mrs. Armstrong came forward from the window. The days had grown a little longer. It was now a week since Billy had begun to sit up, and three weeks since that stormy time when she arrived at the Quimby station — three weeks since Hildreth had gone. The snow had remained on the ground. People were predicting a thaw, and those who had farms near the river were fearing a freshet when the thaw did come. Every morning they looked at the sky for that peculiar warning haze that often heralded the south wind; but as yet it had not come.

"'Tisn't time for Rawdon yet," replied Mrs. Armstrong. There was something in her voice that made her daughter turn quickly towards her.

"Is anything wrong?" she inquired.

The elder woman rose and came to the large chair. She hesitated perceptibly before she said,

"I'm afraid something is wrong."

"What?"—hastily—"with Mr. Meloon?"

"Oh no; with you, Miny. I do fear that you think too much about him. When you first come, so kind of weak and miserable, I thought 'twas a childish notion, and I wouldn't say anything. But I declare, Miny, you kind of worry me keeping it up so. Can't you stop it?"

Billy frowned, but presently she smiled.

"You needn't be troubled about that," she answered. And that is all that she would say.

It was not long before there was the sound of the creaking of heavy sleds on the snow, and Billy saw the oxen go by the window down towards the barn.

Her face brightened indescribably; she carefully placed the mark in the book she had not been reading, and folded her hands over it. She did not know that her mother was watching her. She glanced at the clock. She knew just how long a time usually passed before her host, carefully washed and combed, came into the sitting-room; and precisely at the moment he appeared. He drew a chair to the side of the fireplace after he had shaken hands with the invalid, for, no matter how short a time had elapsed, he always shook hands with her when he entered.

Presently Mrs. Armstrong went out to prepare supper.

"I'm going to the table to-night," announced Billy. "You are to give me your arm; and I'm to have my supper with you and mother. I'm fully equal to it. I'm stronger to-day than I've been any day. I didn't think I should get well so fast. Was it just as good sledding to-day?"

"Yes; better. It 'll grow better until the thaw."

Meloon was leaning far back in his chair, his face towards his companion. You would have said he was ten years younger than he had been a month ago. He had been literally obeying the doctor, and since his part just now was obedience, he had succeeded in living merely in the present. It was enough for him to be aware of this woman's unreasoning happiness; he drank in this knowledge greedily; but never had his respect and tenderness towards her been so great. He thought that every day made his love more perfect and complete. And he was able to thrust all background, all perspective from him.

"Are there any signs of a thaw yet?"

He wondered at the keen interest with which she asked that question every day.

"Not yet."

Now he leaned towards her as he inquired, "Why do you feel so much interest in the thaw?"

He imagined that she grew pale, but her face kept its invincible brightness.

"It's only a notion; don't question me. Will farms be flooded and people drowned?"

"There's such a large body of snow that I'm afraid some of the lower farms will suffer; but no one need be drowned."

Meloon did not resume his lounging position; instead, he bent over the arm of his chair. He was never a man of many words, and of late he had talked less than usual. Billy was not troubled by his silence; it was enough to sit in the room with him; she had a foolish fancy that nothing in the world could then harm her. This fancy she believed might pass away when she had become strong; but, in truth, she gave very little thought to it. Convalescence, with many, is often a state more or less resembling beatitude.

After a little she spoke again.

"There's something I've often wanted to talk with you about. You won't be annoyed?"

"I'm not often annoyed by you."

"That's true," eagerly; "I don't grate on you, do I? You know what I mean?"

He smiled. "I know what you mean; and you never do."

He was resisting a wish to go to her and take her hand; he was often resisting this wish.

"I'm so thankful for that."

"Was grating on me what you wished to talk of?"

"No—no. It was about—about your wife, Mr. Meloon. I never heard you mention her. Did you love her very much, indeed?"

Had Billy's listener been a nervous man he would have now moved uneasily in his chair; but he did not change his position by a hair's-breadth. He did not reply immediately, but presently he said, slowly:

"No, I did not love her. The marriage was a great mistake."

There was something in his tone that made Billy draw back in her chair.

"Oh!" she said, softly, and then hurriedly: "Perhaps I ought not to have asked you such a question. Was it wrong?"

"On the contrary, it was right. You may ask me anything, Billy. To talk with you is a great happiness to me. You must know that."

"Yes," with a little quick breath, "I think I do know that, and I am at home with you—at home. I'm as certain I can never bore you as I am certain that you can never bore me. It's a great thing to be such friends, isn't it? But then"—not waiting for him to answer—"my friendship, of course, can't be as much to you as yours is to me; but that doesn't make me unhappy. We are such friends, aren't we?"

"Yes—yes—we are," almost inaudibly.

"And we always shall be, for ever and ever," smiling.

"For ever and ever."

"But if you didn't promise, I should feel just as safe. Promises aren't much, though we always want them, don't we?" A pause—then: "But I was going to ask you more about your wife. You're willing to tell me? Yes, I knew you were. Why did you marry her? Did you think at first that you did love her?"

"I reply to you, Billy, as honestly as I would to my own soul."

Having said this, the man changed his lounging position for one more upright. "No," he continued, "I never thought I loved her. It happened that I was a great deal with her; she lived over beyond Quimby station, on the Leeds farm—you know where that is? She was a Leeds. She was one of those girls to whom the phrase 'pretty as a pink' applies. I used to be with her brother Frank a great deal, and, of course, with her. To this day I don't know whether I was in the least to blame or not. I went off to college. Frank and I used to write to each other. He began to talk about Dora; she was thought to be in a decline; he said he wished that I would send her a note; he thought it would 'take up her mind.' So

I sent her a note, and she replied. Several letters passed between us. When I came home for the long vacatión Frank met me at the station; he informed me that Dora was better, and he gave me such a meaning glance that I asked point-blank what he meant. The amount of it was that Dora thought, or pretended to think, that she was as good as engaged to me. Frank was confounded at the stare I gave him. He bristled somewhat, but he calmed; he was a good fellow, but one of the kind that you soon outgrow, and then wonder what you ever had found in him. He gave me to understand that his sister was in love with me, and that she had ceased to decline, was very happy, and looking forward to my arrival. All this sounds ridiculous, I know; but I am telling you, Billy, what I never have told before. I let my family and the neighborhood think that it was my own fancy that led me to do as I did. My father took me aside one day and told me that he had nothing against Dora Leeds, save that she didn't know anything, and he was sure I should be deadly tired of my bargain. He never spoke again on the subject. I can see now how very silly I was to sacrifice myself that way. It was an injustice to her as well as to myself. But perhaps she never knew it. I think it was true that she loved me, in her way. I had a notion then that I was the only one for her; but now I'm quite sure that she might have had this fancy for almost any one else with whom she had been thrown; but I didn't know it then. I had fine ideas. I was good to her, I believe. I married her when I left college. My mother was gone then, and I took her home. Well, I tried to do as well as I could. It was a hard time. I didn't love her at all. I didn't even care for her pink and whiteness. It was an insane deed to do. I bore the consequences some way; I'm sure my intentions were good, and I hope it isn't in me to be hard to a woman. Inwardly I grew more and more discontented. My father died, and I kept on with the farm. Dora wasn't even thrifty. She lived ten years. I won't pretend that I grieved when she died, but I was shocked, and I missed her. I grew more and more like a wild man. I kept house, or rather let things go as they would; but I did take care of the farm.

"One day I happened to hear that your mother had been left a widow, and poor. It came to me that it would be a good thing for her and for me if she would be my housekeeper; so I wrote to her, and it happened that you and she had returned from Paris in time to receive the letter. After my wife's death I had a fit of roaming; I went abroad and travelled here and there. The journey did me good; it gave me memories that have been dear to me ever since; but my heart turned to this farm, to these hills. After a year I came back."

Meloon had been gazing into the fire during the latter part of his narrative. Now he turned to his companion, who had been listening to every word, every intonation.

"How you have made me talk of myself," he remarked.

"I love to have you talk of yourself," she answered. She was quite pale; she seemed to be thinking deeply. At last she said: "It was like you to do that—to marry that girl; it was noble of you, but it was very wicked. You did a wicked thing, Mr. Meloon."

"Yes, I learned that long ago."

"And I hope," she began again, "I do hope that you will never let any such sinful pity, or chivalry, influence you again. You won't, will you?"

"No—no."

Meloon was growing hard in manner in sheer self-defence. He thought he guessed what she meant, and his heart ached.

She had sunk far back in her chair; her thin white hands were grasping the arms.

There was a long silence. Meloon raked out the coals on the hearth and put more wood on them. He glanced furtively at Billy; she was so pale and delicate that fear, which had been lulled, sprang up alert again. He remembered Hartwell's advice—in fact, he never for an instant forgot what went so well with his inclination. He walked to her chair and placed his hand on the back of it.

"We're such good friends," he said, "that we must not run the slightest risk of misunderstanding each other."

"Oh no," looking up at him, "not the slightest risk." She spoke ardently, not flushing, but growing even paler.

"That being the case," was the response, "I must tell you that I never even fancied I was really in love, save once. We are becoming quite confidential, aren't we? But friends should be confidential."

He had managed to speak calmly; at the same time he could not bear to have her think that he felt calm.

It was a long time before she spoke again. The brief afternoon had waned to the dusk. Out in the west that apple-green tinge had come to the glow of the horizon above where the sun had disappeared; but this room was lighted by the flames on the hearth. How peaceful the place seemed!

"Oh!" suddenly exclaimed Billy, "I wish—how I wish that I still cared for singing!"

Meloon went to the window; he came back and stood by her chair, but he did not speak.

"I used to care so much," she went on, "but I'm tired of it. I love the still life in the country; you see I'm a country girl, after all. I was wild to go when I left here that time. I was cruel to my mother; I've been so sorry for that. I hope to make it up to her. Everything favored me then. If Boldrea hadn't seen me I couldn't have found my chance immediately. It was to be. I did help Bashy. I'm so glad I helped her. Do you want to know what my plan is, Mr. Meloon? As soon as I get strong I shall buy a place somewhere among these hills and have my mother and Bashy with me. You know I have some money. I would save some after I had paid Miss Runciman. I think we shall be quite comfortable, don't you? And if my home isn't too far away, you will, perhaps, sometimes ride over and call, Mr. Meloon?"

She smiled as she raised her eyes to his, and two tears dropped from her cheeks. Now she laughed. "I am just like a baby, but that is only because I'm weak. I wonder when the great thaw will begin—" with an abrupt change. "Do you know I'm afraid of the thaw? Every time I think of it I shudder—I don't understand it; it must be because I'm ill and nervous. I've even made mother frightened about it; so that she prays harder than ever. She told me yesterday that she did not know but that it might be ordered that the Lord would come at the time of the freshet; she thinks there will be a freshet and many lives will be lost. Are there often dreadful freshets, Mr. Meloon, when people are drowned?"

"I remember only one, when I was ten years old. The farms on the river were overflowed; cattle were lost, and three men and a woman were drowned. I went out with father in a boat. We picked up four sheep. I shall never forget the rushing of the water; I thought it knew what it was doing, and that it wanted to swallow up every living thing. There was an enormous quantity of snow that year, and it was cold, until all at once, in the latter part of April, it turned warm and a southerly rain came on that lasted twenty-four hours. You've no idea how it was in among the hills hereabouts. My farm, the most of it lies too high to be seriously injured. It was a long time before the low lands recovered—they're the best farms down there, but I'd rather have mine."

Meloon was talking deliberately, and secretly with a purpose to keep up some kind of a conversation until he could leave the room. The sight of Billy sitting there shorn of her old-time strength and gayety, and with that wistfulness on her face, was hard for him to bear. He felt every day that the exact path in which he must walk was growing more and more difficult; still, all his life this man had held the belief that nothing need be too difficult.

L

THE FRESHET

"PLEASE sit down," said Billy, presently.

The man hesitated visibly, and she exclaimed, quickly: "But no — perhaps you have something to do. I fear I'm so thoughtless. You must go away just when you choose. Mother has been telling me that I'm very arbitrary with you, and that she wonders you can be so forbearing."

Meloon walked back to his chair by the fire and sat down in it. He smiled genially.

"Really, Billy," he said, "you don't strike me as being arbitrary the least bit in the world. What shall we talk about now? We have stopped worrying about the freshet for the present, I believe."

He was not aware how elaborately kind he seemed.

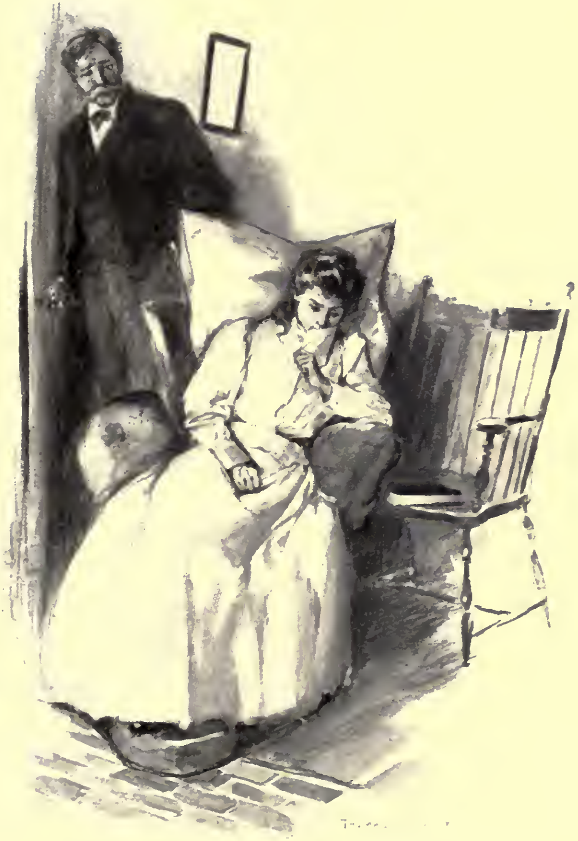
"You're sure I'm not keeping you?" eagerly.

"On the contrary, I'm sure you *are* keeping me; but I like to be kept. What shall we discuss now?"

"Now you laugh at me. But I don't much care. I did want to talk of one other thing before you go. I mentioned those type-written letters to you?—and how I missed them? Yes, I was sure to speak of them to you. I haven't had one since I sailed from Boston last. I think the missing them was one of the reasons that made me so desolate abroad there. They had been my life. I grew not to care for anything. It was very strange. I tried to get used to doing without them, but I couldn't, I was so homesick. Bashy used to scold me. She said a crank had probably sent them, and that now he was sending them to some one else without doubt. I didn't care for that; I wanted him to keep on sending them to me too. The strange thing is that I don't care so much now; I'm so contented here, I suppose, that old troubles haven't such power. When I get a little stronger I mean to read all those letters again and see if I really do care so much, after all. You know we are advised not to allow any one feeling to become really dominant. Oh, how wise we would be if we followed that advice! Mr. Meloon, are you really going? You must see about the milking? Don't forget that I'm going out to supper, and that you are to give me your arm. And will you go to that box on the bureau in my bedroom there, and bring me the letter on the top—it's the last one I had. Thank you. Perhaps you'd like to read it? —no? Good-bye until supper. I'm getting hungry. Don't be late."

Meloon walked across the room; with the door in his hand he looked back at the figure in the chair. He saw Billy bend her head and press her cheek to the type-written sheet she held in her hand. He hesitated an instant; then he returned. He had remarkable control of his voice as he said, standing by her:

"Billy, you must forgive me. I seemed to be obliged to do it. I meant to tell you some day. I tell you now. I wrote those letters. At the time I had a fancy that I couldn't live if I didn't. That was weak. But a man is liable to be weak when he fully intends to be strong. I had my type-writer up in the attic. I didn't wish anybody to know about it.



"I SAW HER PRESS HER CHEEK TO THE TYPE-WRITTEN SHEET"

I had help—Bathsheba Hildreth. I would send her a batch of letters, and she would mail one each day. You can have no idea how I cared. I even used to think that these notes kept me alive. You know there's no fool like an old fool. But when you had married Hildreth—at any rate, when you went to England—I found strength to stop. Do you think you can forgive me?"

She looked up at him. She made no attempt to speak. He saw the light on her face.

"We won't talk of this; I can't," he said. His features set themselves in hard lines. There was the same rigidity of muscles as he went over the packed snow of the path to the barn, a milk-pail in one hand, a lantern in the other. But once at the barn, among the cows and horses, attending to their wants, the relaxation came, that indescribable calming effect which domestic animals can often exert upon those who are intimate with them. When he returned to the house with his first pail of milk, he left his lantern behind, hung on its peg. The moon was rising in a bank of thin cloud; this bank extended all about the horizon, though the stars shone thick in the zenith. There was a curious softness in the air, and a perfume, as of spring flowers. Whence does this perfume come when snow covers the world as far as the eye can see—when there seems not a single tender green growth in the universe?

Meloon stood still. There seemed to be absolutely no wind. He held up one hand; the palm was towards the south, and on the palm there was felt a faint, soft breath.

"It's coming," he said, aloud; and then: "I wonder if Ripley, and Farwell, and Jewett are prepared. They ought to take their cattle away, and maybe their women-folk. They never did notice the signs of the weather enough; but the Chamberlins, farther down the river, 'll be sure to be ready for anything."

He hurried in with his milk-pail, and then back to the barn. Trooper and Lotos this time trailed behind him, lazily sniffing along the path. Before he returned to the house Meloon harnessed his brown mare into the cutter, and tied her to the hitching-ring. When he went back the second time it seemed to him that the gentle wind, which came from the south, was like a breath of June; and now the breeze came in irregular puffs, that in half an hour had settled into a steady breeze, warm and sweet. The clouds were rising and slowly blotting out the stars.

But when the master of the house gave his arm to Billy to take her out into the big kitchen, where the supper was waiting, he said nothing about the change in the weather. He walked gently, feeling how she leaned upon him, how weak she still was, though there was a steady increase in her strength now from day to day, and she would soon be about. There was a subdued air of cheerfulness in the manner of the three people at the table that night. Before they rose the wind was making a slight moaning noise around the southerly corner of the house.

"I do believe," said Mrs. Armstrong, "that the wind has changed; ain't it gettin' into the south, Rawdon?"

Meloon rose. He had lingered, watching Billy's face as she talked or listened.

"I'm going to drive down to the intervale," he said, abruptly. "I want to see Jewett and Farwell."

They all rose. A certain look of excitement came to their faces. Meloon went to Billy's side and asked if he should help her back to the other room. She was standing, holding to the back of a chair. She shook her head.

"Oh no. I'm stronger already. I can walk alone. You must go. You think the thaw has begun, don't you?"

"Yes; it has begun. But it always takes time. And you needn't be afraid. This farm is situated so that all the ice of the frigid zone melting here couldn't harm it. Don't sit up for me. Keep Lotos in the house; but Trooper is going. Remember, nothing can harm you here."

"We're not afraid," answered Billy, quickly; "but I'm excited. I feel as I used to feel when I was a child and a tempest was coming up in the west. Are you going to be careful of yourself, Mr. Meloon?"

The man laughed. He had put on his great fur coat. He walked to the door, and as he opened it the wind came in a gust and made the smoke rush down the chimney.

"How warm it is getting!" cried Mrs. Armstrong. "It seems strange for it to come so warm all at once."

Meloon had stepped without the house, but he came back. He hastily unbuttoned the wrap of fur and threw it on a chair. Without speaking, he went to a closet and took an ordinary overcoat. The two women watched him in silence. In a few moments they heard the jingle of his sleigh as the mare trotted by the house into the lane. Lotos jumped on a chair, put his paws on the window-shelf, and tried to look out; then he whined. Billy rose and moved slowly across the room to the dog. She placed a hand each side her face and looked through the glass. Far away down the lane she saw a bit of dark rapidly going on. The panes rattled; the wind was rising fast.

"I'm sorry Rawdon has gone," said the elder woman. She began to pick up the dishes from the table and pile them in the sink.

"Nothing can happen to him," confidently asserted the other. But she gazed again through the window. This time she saw nothing but the stretch of snow lying under a cloudy sky, through which the moon was slowly wading.

Billy lingered in the kitchen; she hardly noticed the terrier who came and pressed against her side. She heard the fir-trees at the north of the house thrash and moan, and the sound worried her.

"I wish you'd open the door, mother," she said.

"Why?" turning from her dish-washing.

"Because I want to know how warm it's growing. Oh, I wish I could go out! How strange it is!"

Mrs. Armstrong opened the door a few inches, but the wind thrust it wide and blew through the room, slamming a door somewhere else. Lotos made a dash outside, but he returned when his mistress called him, and stood growling by her side.

It was only after a struggle that the door was closed, and this time it was bolted.

"I do believe we're going to have a dreadful spell of weather."

Mrs. Armstrong picked up the towel she had dropped. "It's as warm as June. This snow will go as if 'twas put into a hot oven. There'll be dreadful accidents."

"But Mr. Meloon will be safe; he knows exactly what to do," asserted Billy.

Nevertheless, that assertion did not keep the anxiety from her heart as the hours dragged on.

By nine o'clock it seemed late in the evening. The wind was rising still, and sometimes there came a dash of rain on the front windows, which opened towards the south. By this time the change of temperature had penetrated to the rooms. The two women kept only a low fire on the hearth; they opened the door into the shed. A little while later Billy proposed that they should have some tea, so her mother brewed it, and then they sat side by side and drank it, speaking only now and then.

"Don't you think you ought to go to bed, Miny?" Mrs. Armstrong put this question for the third time, and for the third time the reply was the same.

"Oh no, mother; I'm not going to bed at all."

The strong tea stimulated her, so that she was wakeful and strong. She walked across the room like her old self.

At a quarter to eleven there was the sound of thunder in the west, and the lightning flashed sharply; the rain came down as in a summer shower.

Billy and her mother sat close together on the lounge, with Lotos at their feet; the terrier's hair was bristled along his spine, and he growled when a clap of thunder came.

"Where do you suppose he is?"

It was Billy who asked this when the tempest began to subside.

"Where who is?" was the responsive question; Mrs. Armstrong moved as if released from binding cords.

But before there was any reply, they heard the sound of sleigh-bells coming down the lane. They both rose as by one impulse, and stood listening. The long clock in the corner of the kitchen struck eleven. The younger woman remembered how, at this hour, she had been so often wrapping her furs about her in her dressing-room to go to the carriage that waited for her after the opera was over; and as she remembered, she inhaled again the odors of the flowers that were piled in the bit of a room.

Had that singing-woman really been herself?

But why should she recall those things when her whole life was centred in this corner of New Hampshire? She did not understand.

The sleigh-bells did not go by and on to the barn. They stopped abruptly, and then a whip-handle rapped on the door. Mrs. Armstrong, after several attempts, slid back the bolt and the door opened violently. A man in a long rubber coat and rubber boots stepped quickly in, shutting the door and putting his back against it. Billy noted how the coat and boots glistened in the lamplight, and dripped in many trickles to the floor.

"Where's Meloon?"

"He went down to the intervale right after supper."

"All right; if he hadn't gone I wanted him to go now. We folks that are lucky enough to be on high land 'll have to help them that ain't. I can't stop a minute. The whole world's thawin' 'n' runnin' down into the valleys. I never saw the snow act so in my life. It's jest about posh now. We'll have a lot of sheep to save, I guess; sheep ain't wuth much for savin' themselves. They jest give up, 'n' die. They ain't a bit like hogs."

Having thus spoken, the man, who lived two miles up the road, left the house, and the two women managed to fasten the door again, the wind and the rain beating in on them.

"You'll get cold, Miny. I do wish you'd keep away," from the mother.

"I sha'n't take cold," briefly.

Billy walked to the fire and stood before it. She saw the green baize bag that held Meloon's violin. She took out the instrument and held it under her chin, gently picking the strings. She fancied it spoke to her with the voice of its master.

"Miny, I don't know what to make of you," querulously. "As for me, I couldn't touch a fiddle now unless I was made to."

Billy replaced the violin in its bag without speaking; then she sat down in Meloon's chair at one side of the hearth. She leaned back and closed her eyes. For a time Mrs. Armstrong fidgeted in and out among the lower rooms; then she took her old place by the work-table and began to knit. The hours must be worn through in some way. The wind and rain kept up all night—how long that night was! Before morning the two watchers could hear the water rushing and gurgling everywhere down past the house.

Once Billy went to a window at the north and opened it. Here they were sheltered from the wind, and could listen to the roar that filled the air. It was still raining. It was not very dark, since behind the clouds there was a moon. They could see, between them and the barn where the cattle were, a dark, broad stream running over the snow.

"I'm glad the barn stands up the slope, and is so strong," said Billy.

"The old carriage-house is going," said Mrs. Armstrong, a few moments later.

The building, farthest down of all, and which held in late years only farm-carts, ploughs, and barrows, moved; it hesitated, then swung about, and began to drift off.

Neither of the women spoke. Mrs. Armstrong had brought a blanket and was holding it around her daughter and herself. They watched the house reel along as if some sentient thing had grasped it.

Suddenly Billy turned away. Her mother carefully shut the window. They returned to the sitting-room and established themselves there again.

"Mother," said Billy, "why did you talk to me as if Mr. Meloon were thinking of marrying you?"

It was a brief space of time before Mrs. Armstrong could reply; for the inquiry had come with the suddenness of a blow.

"Why?" at last. "Because I thought it might be so, and—and—" a silence.

"And what?" with some harshness. Then, more gently: "Oh, do forgive me if I speak a hard word, mother. If I had known that you were mistaken, that he had no such thought, I might have been a happy woman these two years back. And now I can never be happy."

She spoke with perfect calmness. She was not looking at her mother, but at the coals on the hearth. Something in the wild tumult without had the effect of loosening her reserve, as unwonted surroundings will sometimes change our mood so much as, for the moment, to seem to change our character.

Finally Mrs. Armstrong was able to speak.

"I did think it likely that he'd want to marry me; and all the neighbors thought so. It did seem kind of probable, didn't it? Not that he ever said anything. But widowers don't say much, they tell me. I didn't think so for long; and we ain't suited to each other at all. I c'n see that plain enough now. I used to make sure you were in love with Vane."

"And you told that to Mr. Meloon?"

"Yes, of course. You know he's a man you can confide in. Why shouldn't I tell him? But finally I did think I was mistaken, though you went and married Vane. But I got all muddled, and that's a fact. I didn't know what I did think, and I don't now. I've been having such strange suspicions; I can't make out anything. Do you feel like speaking out plain to me, Miny? I s'pose you're being an opery-singer makes you different. I can't understand much of anything in these days. I wish you did feel like speaking."

But Billy was silent. She shook her head in the negative, and then gazed at the fire again. The mood for speaking had gone as quickly as it had come. Her mother's words had made all that had passed seem simple and natural.

The storm kept on all night. Towards morning the wind abated somewhat, but the rain came down heavily. At three o'clock Billy yielded to her mother's entreaties and laid herself down on the lounge. In truth, she was weary and weak. She closed her eyes and tried presistently to sleep; she was at last in a sort of half slumber when she heard her mother go quickly across the room. She sat up instantly. Was that Trooper's impatient bark? Yes; and she heard the slow jangle of bells towards the barn. It was daylight; and it was still raining hard. The same roar of rushing waters was audible in every direction.

It seemed a long time before Meloon came in. When he did come, Billy had reached the kitchen that she might satisfy herself the sooner as to his welfare. He had thrown off his overcoat in the shed; he was soaked to the skin, sodden and clammy, He paused by the hot cooking-stove, and now the two women saw his face, white, and worn, and strained.

Billy walked slowly towards him. She saw that he had endured something more than the work of helping to save the lives of his neighbors' animals, severe though that work might have been. Her old terror at the thought of the freshet came back in full force. She sat down in a chair near where he stood.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's been a hard night," hoarsely.

"That is not all. Tell me."

The man gazed at her an instant. It was impossible to know what was in his sunken eyes.

"Yes," he answered. He continued, speaking rapidly: "It will be best not to try to keep it back. You've got to know. We've found him—Hildreth. The floods have given him up. His body came down the river just below Jewett's. It must have been lying covered with snow, frozen, in the gorge between those two hills—lying ever since that storm when he disappeared. I tried to find him; God knows I tried. I did everything I could. I hunted for days when everybody else had given up. He—it—is lying there at Jewett's now. We all knew him directly—the cold had preserved the body. For God's sake, Billy, don't look like that! You were not to blame. Serissa, take her to bed. I don't dare to touch her. Make her know that all was done that could have been done. Make her know that, Serissa, will you?"

Mrs. Armstrong took her daughter's hand and led her away. The elder woman was crying gently, but the younger was dry-eyed. She went obediently, put herself on the bed, and let her mother minister to her; she swallowed red lavender and hot water, not knowing that anything was passing her lips.

Meloon presently came into the sitting-room in dry clothing. He moved noisily, then paused in the middle of the room, for he heard the sound of a praying voice. It was Serissa praying for her child. She was beseeching God to deal gently with Miny, to lead her safely through this darkness, and to give her, after a while, many years of happiness, for she was young, and might be happy.

Meloon bent his head.

THE END

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